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C O U S I N S

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF 'MR SMITH: A PART OF HIS LIFE'
AND 'PAULINE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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PART I.



C O U S I N S.

CHAPTER I.

S I M O N.

“Come, come, return; return, thou wandering lord.”

—*Henry VI.*

“I SUPPOSE we are to call him Simon, as he is our cousin?”

“Call a man of forty ‘Simon!’”

“He is not forty, Hester: he is only thirty-eight; and I do not see what else we could say. We could not call him Colonel Lutteridge.”

“I could,” said Hester, promptly.

“Well, you, perhaps,” replied her elder sister, with the natural contempt of twenty-four for seventeen; “you are such a child. But for Jane and me it would be ridiculous; don’t you

think so, Jane?" appealing to a new-comer of an age between the two, but apparently nearer to that of the last speaker.

"Think what?" said she, not having caught the beginning of the sentence.

"That we could not call Simon Lutteridge anything but 'Simon.' He is our own first-cousin, you know; and though we should not, of course, rush into names of any sort all at once, by-and-by it will be the only thing we can say."

"It will be a long by-and-by with me," added Hester.

Jane agreed with both. Certainly "Colonel Lutteridge" sounded too formal; but as certainly did "Simon" seem too familiar. She thought—with the common-sense that usually distinguished Jane Manners—that until a nearer acquaintance had shown them upon what terms they were to be with their unknown kinsman, it would be safest to call him nothing at all.

"Mr Nothing-at-all! The very thing!" cried Hester. "I shall say—making my reverence, toes in, arms out, countenance expressing mildness and candour—look, Agatha, Jane, *do*, look; —'Mr Nothing-at-all, I am charmed to welcome

you back to your native land. I trust, Mr Nothing-at-all, that you are in excellent health and spirits — that in the trying Indian clime you have imbibed no insidious disease, no mysterious disorder, — in short, Mr Nothing-at-all, that, whatever else accompanies you back to England, you will of that sort of thing bring home—nothing at all!’ Rather a collapse at the end, I am afraid!”

The object of discussion was, as has been already shown, an absolute stranger to the speakers, to whom he was, nevertheless, on the maternal side, closely related.

His father had been Lady Manners’s own and only brother ; and Lady Manners was the mother of the three young girls thus gathered in conclave.

Lutteridge Manor and Wancote Hall, out of whose windows one of the group was now looking, faced each other on opposite sides of a broad, smooth river, and the boat-house of the one was within five minutes pull of the boat-house of the other.

Along one bank, the slopes of Wancote stretched for several miles ; and the woods of Lutteridge, on the other, extended still further ;

while, even by the road, the two mansions were barely three miles apart.

The neighbourhood of each to each being thus close, it may be thought strange that it should be possible for any of the cousins not to have met; but this can be easily explained.

While yet a minor, Simon Lutteridge had come into his inheritance; and caring little then for a quiet residence in a rural part of the country, he had, at a very early age, entered the army, with an express view to foreign service. He had gone to India, and exchanged into the native cavalry; soon after which he had married, without any particular act of volition on his part, a lady of large fortune and pleasing manners, whose friends had joined with his in helping forward the match.

All had been agreed in thinking that the best thing possible had been done for the young people; and when, after only one year of wedded life, the gentle girl sank into an early grave, at the birth of her first child, pity and sympathy were abundantly bestowed on the youthful widower.

Nor would a second bride have been wanting, had such been desired.

But not, although the child thus left to him was ere long seized with one of the ailments of infancy, to which it succumbed, and he was now without wife or son, did Colonel Lutteridge appear disposed to make a second venture towards domestic happiness.

For fifteen years he remained as he was, rising step by step in his profession, until, at the date when our story commences, he had been colonel of the regiment for a year and a half.

He had then suddenly, and without assigning any particular reason for doing so, thrown up his command, and announced his intention of returning to England and taking up his residence at Lutteridge.

So long, however, had he been absent from the Manor, that his brother's widow, who, with her two children, had tenanted it during his foreign sojourn, had almost come to be looked upon, and certainly looked upon herself, as its sole mistress.

Her son, a boy of twelve, was at this time heir-presumptive; and over his interests, she, herself a woman still young and handsome, kept watch. She was startled, more than she

would have owned for worlds, by the intelligence that her brother-in-law was actually on his way home, and that, not as a mere visitor, but to take up his position as lord of the manor and master of the household.

Wherein she expected to be caught tripping, she knew best herself.

Not in any great matters, we may be sure : it is in very filmy and delicate peccadilloes that people like Mrs Robert Lutteridge dabble ; and the " Ah ! " which escaped her lips on the perusal of Simon's letter may have been due rather to apprehensions connected with the future than the past.

She had reckoned as much on his absorption in military duties as on his residence abroad for preventing that nightmare of her imagination, his second marriage, from becoming a reality. Coming to England, to Lutteridge, and to leisure, how would he now escape ? Here he was to be within range of Wancote, in close proximity to the three charming girls, to whom he must appear, when he came, in the guise of a relation, yet with the halo of a stranger ! What position could be more dangerous ?

On his former visits home he had not hap-

pened to meet them, it being only since he had gone out for the last time that their father, Sir John Manners, had succeeded to the title and estates of Wancote. Up to that time Sir John had not resided in the county, and though he could just recollect that he had at intervals seen and spoken to a young man who he was told was his nephew, in point of fact he remembered nothing more about him.

"I think he was fair," he said once, but it turned out to be a bad shot, the person in question being as black as a coal; and in consequence it may be doubted whether the uncle had not some other man all the time in his eye.

At the time when Agatha, Jane, and Hester were discussing the title they should append to their cousin, whose near approach had just been announced, their father could give them no help. He could not even say what his nephew was likely to think himself on the subject; he could tell them his age to a year, reckoning up on his fingers by data known to himself alone, but he could do no more; nor, truth to tell, were the daughters themselves eager on the subject.

Their lives were pretty well filled up at this

period. They gave to their cousin's arrival all the attention they could spare from their books and rides, their music and embroidery. They prognosticated *fêtes* at the Manor, and wondered if Constance would like the change. Agatha, who was old of her age, went a step further, and took into consideration the prudent question as to whether it would or would not make any difference to Jack.

But when they had done so much, and had even disposed of his name, they forgot all about the event which so powerfully agitated the mind of their cousin Robert's widow. It was infinitely more to her, as was natural; but she did not guess, nor would she indeed have believed, how little it was to them.

It happened on the day she entered with her budget of news, which was intended to take the people at Wancote by storm, that all three sisters were deeply engaged over a book of manuscript songs which had been lent them, and which they durst not keep beyond a set time. How to make the most of that time was the question. The music had taken their fancy, and they were greatly pleased to have even a brief and restricted opportunity of making it their own. Each had

to choose rapidly what she would have ; that was done during Constance's stay ; directly she left, Agatha, losing not a moment, sat down in right of her seniority to transcribe her choice ; and it was not till she was thus engaged, and Hester was idling in the window recess longing for her turn, that they found a moment to talk about their cousin's return. All that had to be said about him had been done with long before Agatha yielded up the borrowed volume, and before Jane and Hester had both likewise finished with it they had wellnigh forgotten his existence.

They were engaged you see in a great work.

First had to be made a rough pencil-draft ; this was next tried on the piano, tested, and all faults corrected, the amended version having finally to be copied out with infinite pains and skill into their beautifully bound and illustrated musical albums. As may be imagined a great deal of time was needed, since such labours could only proceed at stated hours when free from interruption ; and naturally in the press of business less important matters slipped out of sight. The school children, to be sure, were not neglected, nor were rides and walks omitted ; neither did the two elder girls fail to shoot their correct

number of ends at the archery targets on most days, but certainly Colonel Lutteridge was as though he had not existed, or to speak more correctly, as though he existed exactly as he had done for the last twenty years.

We are, however, going too fast, and must return to Constance and her announcement of the expected arrival.

“He is coming home, think!” cried she to her aunt, Lady Manners. “He really is, at last! Poor old Simon, how he must hate it! A man who has spent all his life in that odd sort of way, you know, will be puzzled what to do with himself in a place like this. Of course, for *us* it will be charming, but for him I am afraid that it may be just a little dull. Do you not think so? However, he must judge for himself; and I suppose he is not likely to remain very long at a time in any one place. He has actually started, did I tell you? We may expect him in about three weeks. He comes overland, and had got to that place I forget the name of on the other side of the Suez Canal. He would have let me know sooner, but just missed the Bombay mail.”

“When did you hear?” inquired her aunt.

“Yesterday. I expected a letter this week, for he is a capital correspondent,—he is always writing. Of course it is natural—he has no one else—and a man must have some one to open himself out to. When I saw Simon last—it was in London, seven years ago—what a handsome fellow he was then to be sure! but no doubt”—hastily—“he is changed by this time. It was just after my husband’s death”—with a suitable fall of the voice—“and he was so good and kind that I shall never forget it. He said we were to look on the Manor quite as our own home, and asked me to write regularly and keep him up to all that went on there. Such an epistle his was yesterday! Really, I have hardly had time to read it, which is too bad of me, for I daresay it took the poor fellow an age to write;—but I have been so busy. Lady Westmacott came to call, and then I had to go to Seeley; and it rained afterwards, or I should certainly have come yesterday.”

“No need to apologise, Constance,” said her aunt, quietly. “It is quite good enough of you to come to-day; and, as it happens, we

should have missed you if you had come yesterday, for we were out."

"Then I am in luck, for I hate to find you out. I like to get into this chair, and have a good talk, when I come to Wancote. But about Simon, I thought you would have cared to know at once," she added, with a little air of reproach.

"You see he has been so long away," apologised her aunt. She could not, to be sure, be expected to be violently agitated, but she felt rather ashamed that her lack of interest had been so obvious.

"So long—yes, that is it. That is what makes it so exciting, such an upset; his coming home at all, I mean. He has been so long away that really he might almost—well—have stayed away, eh?" said she, laughing. It was an honest laugh, betraying the inner man, and even Lady Manners smiled. "However," continued Constance, recalling herself, and dropping back into the tone her aunt knew so well, and disliked so much, the peculiarly artificial accent which Mrs Robert Lutteridge assumed when she was saying what she wished to say, rather than what she felt; "however, you know, it is really

a delightful surprise. I made all the haste I could in coming over, knowing that you and Sir John would be particularly pleased."

"It does seem a pity that Lutteridge should be so long without its master," said Lady Manners, when at length she had the chance of saying anything. "It never seems quite right that the number of people who live on such large properties should be entirely at the mercy of agents and stewards—people who can hardly have the same——"

"Oh, as to that, I don't see that it makes much difference," interrupted her niece, shortly. "We go on, you know, very well; quite as if he were here indeed. Lewis looks after the farms and tenants—I have nothing to do with the outdoor workers, they are not in my department; and as to the management within, I think you have always allowed, my dear aunt, that it is very fair, all things considered."

"More than fair, Constance. That was not what I meant. You are an excellent manager, and I have no doubt Colonel Lutteridge will say so, when he arrives."

"Oh, don't call him Colonel Lutteridge!" exclaimed the visitor, throwing up her hands.

“Oh, how horrible it sounds! A poor broken-down fellow like Simon to be so spoken of by his own father’s sister! My dear aunt, I shall expect to hear you address me as Mrs Lutteridge next!”

Her aunt coloured.

“Just when he expects to come home, and be made much of among us all!” cried Constance, further; “just when he is looking to be received by his own family——”

“But, my dear Constance——”

“My dear aunt, Simon is the last person to wish it, I assure you; and you will allow that I ought to know. He would be quite hurt.”

Hurt! Her aunt’s lips opened, but she thought better of it, and forbore. Little did her niece know how often she was indebted to this habit of forbearance, nor did she so much as suspect that it was taxed in the present instance.

“Being, as we suspect, indeed as we very nearly know, on account of his health that dear Simon comes home, I think he will expect us all to be particularly easy and friendly; no stiffness you know, no formality between such near relations; so I have thought of a little

plan," continued the gay lady, who was always thinking of little plans which were the plague of her aunt's life. "I mean to call our neighbours together, and give him a merry welcome, to kill the fatted calf, in short,—though it would be impolite to call it so. We shall receive him with due honour, with bonfires, bells ringing, and arches in the village; don't you think so?"

"From what I gather of my nephew," said Lady Manners, stiffly, "he would scarcely care for such demonstrations."

"But they would surely be suitable? Fancy, he has been absent for nearly eighteen years; he knows nobody; he has hardly ever been even seen by any one! Let us show him first to the public in his own halls. None of them will know which he is, until they are told! Absolutely! There will be all sorts of mistakes made. Think how droll it would be if Simon himself were asked, 'Pray tell me which is Colonel Lutteridge?' Oh, I should die with laughing; Hester and I would shout!"

"It is hardly likely——"

"The most likely thing in the world, my dear aunt; of course neither Sir John nor you

would make such a mistake, you of course recollect him——” pausing for the negative which she well knew must come.

“Sir John, oh yes,” said Lady Manners, too truthful to be silent; “but I—I do not think—I do not remember ever having met—my nephew.”

She blushed as she spoke, for it went against her to allow so much. Why, she could not have told. “There is nothing extraordinary in it,” she argued mentally, “considering that we lived almost at the other end of England, and had only paid visits to this neighbourhood at long intervals, until within the last few years. We had hardly ever been at Wancote, at least I had not, when he left Lutteridge, and he has been home but seldom since.”

All the same she would have given something at the moment to have been able to say that she knew her nephew perfectly.

On her side was the relationship, his was the home in which she had been brought up, her family was represented in him, and it did seem hard thus to hear him chattered about and vouched for by a little pert interloper, who, when she had married even the inferior second

son, had not been looked upon with any particular favour by the family in general.

Her good looks and a certain vivacity which passed for wit among some people had procured for her the promotion, for such it was.

To see her, owing to Simon's generosity, enthroned at the Manor, and to be forced in consequence to admit her to all the intimacy of relationship, had long been a thorn in her aunt's side; and although she could not help owning that, considering the circumstances, it had perhaps been the right thing to do, she never in her secret soul could reconcile herself to the necessity.

Perhaps Constance had never tried her patience so severely as she did at this juncture. The look of elation, of superiority, which her aunt's confession produced, pricked that good lady to the heart.

That she should be swamped with the rabble, counted in with the benighted ones over whose ignorance Constance was exulting, was the last drop in the cup of her humiliation; and she felt that she must at least vindicate herself from the imaginary charge of inquiring which was Colonel Lutteridge, from Colonel Lutteridge himself.

“We have his photograph,” she said.

“So have we; dozens. But what are photographs? They never give the slightest idea what a person is like, do they?” (Sir John always complained that Constance tailed off every sentence with an appeal.) “We make him send us one nearly every year; we write to him, and worry him till we get them; but we never think they are like what he really is,—do you? Jack has his book quite full of his uncle; and every time he comes home, he asks if there is not another.”

The suggestion was not, however, lost. “I think I shall have a dinner-party on the night of his arrival,” she subjoined, suddenly. It was true that only at Wancote and at Lutteridge were these likenesses of her brother-in-law to be found; but still there were other ways in which he might get to be known in the neighbourhood without her means: people would call, he might be met on the road, seen at church,—a dozen things might happen which would be fatal to her *coup*, if delayed.

She had set her heart on introducing Simon in his own county, and in this curious piece of ambition she was not to be thwart-

ed. She would take the field in person, and at once.

“He writes from that place—Suez—is it Suez? Never mind, one name is as good as another; this is all I care for, that he will be here in less than three weeks,” she said; “he will write again from Paris, and name the exact day we may expect him. The whole thing has been done in such a hurry, that I cannot understand it, except by supposing it has had to do with his health.”

The conjecture seemed probable, and there was nothing to be said against it.

“In fact it *must* have been so,” continued Constance, warming into confidence. “I shall have to be terribly particular about the cooking, shan’t I? I must make him tell me what dishes he has to avoid, and if there are any his doctor recommends. I shall have to coax, I daresay; men don’t like to confess to being obliged to live by rule; they would rather eat all sorts of unwholesome messes than have it supposed they are afraid of them. If Simon should be forbidden to dine out, even at a family dinner, my dear aunt, you won’t take it amiss, will you?”

“Are you wise to have a party for him before you know——”

“Oh, I am not afraid.”

“Before you know——”

“But he gives me *carte blanche*.”

“Before you know,” — Lady Manners was determined to be heard — “whether he is really coming home ill, and unable to stand the fatigue——”

“Ill! But who said he was coming home ill?”

“Well,” exclaimed her aunt, opening her eyes a little wider than her surprise made absolutely necessary, in her determination that her niece should see that she had opened them, — “well, my dear! Certainly, if you did not say so, I don’t know who did.”

“Dear auntie, you have taken me up so sharply! Ill! I never said ill! There has not been a word of illness, and if I feared that he might turn out to be something of a — well — chronic, respectable, comfortable invalid, I was but giving my own impressions. Everybody comes home from India with *something*, now, don’t they? And his throwing up his profession, without so much as a hint

of the how or why, looks suspicious, you will allow. Dear Simon! I am sure I hope and trust he is not ill. It would be quite too sad, if he were only coming back to his own, dear, beautiful home to be nursed! I declare it would be dreadful! Mrs Edwards said to me directly I told her—and you know what a shrewd old thing she is—that I might depend upon it there was something wrong with him.”

“Very forward in Mrs Edwards, I think,”—the elder lady drew herself up. “Quite out of her place to make such a remark.”

“Oh, well, she is privileged, aunt; I only mentioned it to show what people say. I don’t want the girls to be disappointed,”—they had taken no part in the conversation, being occupied, as we have before stated,—“I don’t want them to be looking for a dashing young soldier. They will think him quite an old man, I daresay; will you not Agatha?”

“I daresay we shall,” said Agatha, demurely.

“Of course we shall,” decided Hetty.

CHAPTER II.

A MODEL NEIGHBOURHOOD.

“ We loved each other, it is true,
As such near neighbours mostly do.”

—*Recreation.*

CONSTANCE was obliged to rest content with achieving a very small part of her programme, since Colonel Lutteridge's next letter put an emphatic negative on any public manifestations of welcome. As he had not been asked about the party, he could not put a veto on it, and accordingly, cards were issued, immediately that the date could be fixed.

Her dinner-party, at least, she would have.

It was very welcome at Wancote, since the neighbourhood was a sociable rather than a gay one, and an invitation finding its way to one house, meant that a corresponding billet would be dropped at most other houses within

a range of seven miles or so. There would be the Westmacotts, the Parkers, the Searles, and probably Mr and Mrs Martin. Mr and Mrs Martin were the only doubtful people. They generally managed to slip in—were sure, indeed, to be asked if others failed, but were not so certain of being included in the first list.

At these little gatherings there were no uncomfortable folks to be left out in the cold, no intruders whose reception by fellow-guests would be doubtful—very few open dislikes even. Everybody went everywhere.

The explanation of so amicable a state of things lay, it is probable, as much as anything else, in the absence of numbers, and in the distance which divided each from the other.

Every mansion was well encompassed by its own surroundings, and consequently there were not above half-a-dozen families within driving distance. The county town was fully fifteen miles distant; and though the large and prosperous village of Seeley where all shopping had to be done, was more accessible, it was sufficiently far off from most to make going there an afternoon's expedition.

Towards it the woods of Lutteridge Manor

stretched for several miles, and the spires of its churches were visible from the upper windows of the mansion. The property was a fine one, and contrary to what is usual, had not suffered from its master's absence. He had done a wise thing in doing a generous one. He could not have installed a better viceroy than his brother's widow, who, without superiority of mind or extraordinary talents of any kind, was nevertheless endowed with a cool, shrewd head, an indomitable will, and the fortunate knack of making those under her authority do as they were bid.

Nothing imposed on her; nothing escaped her.

What she meant to have done, was done in spite of opposition or obstacles; argument or appeal was vain if she took her stand on the other side of any question; and, in consequence, she was well served, feared, and disliked.

Her own interests were, we may be allowed to affirm, paramount. That her son would one day succeed to all the fair lands which daily met her view, she scarcely doubted: and she felt much in the position of a queen-mother holding the kingdom till the youthful prince should come of age; but, all the same, no fault could be found with her administration,

save perhaps in such trifles as were nobody's business but her own.

Her brother-in-law was, of all men, the least likely to call her to account; and they even escaped her memory in the tumult of new thoughts and feelings which surged through her brain whenever she thought of his return.

And when was she not thinking of this? It was her last recollection at night, her first one in the morning; it touched her too closely to admit of any rival interest.

However, now that he was actually on the way, and that no representations would suffice to hinder him for so much as an hour, there remained nothing for it but to put a bold front on the matter, tell the news with a joyous face, and insinuate apprehensions, which she was not herself aware how ardently she hoped might prove to be well founded.

Accordingly, she hasted herself while the day was yet her own, trotted her ponies from door to door, and made Colonel Lutteridge's return the theme at every morning call.

Wancote, whatever she might otherwise insinuate to her aunt, was the last house she went to. She had a reluctance to inform its inhabit-

ants of what concerned them more nearly than it did any of their neighbours, which she could not overcome. Why should she? After all, she argued, he is nothing to them personally; they can, so far at least, have no special interest in him; they can very well wait.

But even while thus pooh-poohing any claims to priority, and resolving to evince no undue eagerness on the occasion, she felt awkward when brought face to face with her aunt.

The very equanimity with which Lady Manners received the news threw her back. She had been prepared for excitement, for questions, for a measure of appropriation in the event, which should enable her to be civilly impertinent. The absence of all this was bewildering: she did not know how to take it; and of one thing only she was certain—that she did not wish it to come out that she had been to Westmacott Castle, to Wet Cliff, to Earl's Court, and to Seeley Vicarage, before she came to Wancote. She had even been to Oakbank, had even given that little absurd Mrs Martin the chance of talking to Lady Manners about her own nephew's intended return before it was known to his aunt.

She felt ashamed of herself (such is the effect of

good breeding over bad), and resolved, in so far as she could, to atone ; and accordingly her note of invitation, which was written immediately on the receipt of Simon's second letter, was sent over within the hour, and was all that it ought to have been.

Of Lady Manners, Constance, in common with all the neighbourhood, stood in considerable awe. She was a gentlewoman of the old school, with some pride, and still more dignity, in whom, moreover, reserve was so natural, and self-control so habitual, that she would have died sooner than have shown the annoyance her niece perpetually caused her. With her husband it was different : neither art nor nature could repress his honest opinion ; his feelings must be ever on the tip of his tongue ; but as, to do him justice, they bore that dangerous altitude better than most would have done, perhaps he did not lose much by his frankness.

He too was of the old school, in the full vigour, if not in the prime of life,—whose boast it was that he could still shoot, fish, walk, ride, and row as well as either of his sons, and better than any of their companions.

In outdoor pursuits he found his chief enjoy-

ment ; although, if confined of necessity to the house, he could still manage to pass the day, for he had Scott's novels to read, and salmon-flies to tie.

Politics disturbed him but little ; while of " Church, army, physic, law," he knew as much or as little as country gentlemen usually do, who are domineered over by their own parson, pay the bills of a soldier son, send their tenants to the Hall to be dosed, and as fast as they lose one lawsuit begin another. He knew enough to keep him silent.

But perhaps the single point in Sir John's character, which distinguished him from the thousand and one other Sir Johns, to whom, in many ways, he bore resemblance, was the antipathy he had for men of his own age. They had, as a rule, outgrown the pleasures in which he still delighted, and were unequal to the tasks he could with ease accomplish. Consequently they bored him, he fretted in their society, was nervous, unhappy, and unnaturally mild and amiable.

When he heard that his nephew was about to return home, his first thought was, that with Simon he would not need to be on any ceremony.

“He is young enough for that, at least,” he said; “I shall treat him quite as if he were a young fellow, in spite of the ridiculous stuff Constance talks. Thirty-eight is no age for a single man : it would simply annoy him to have me making a fuss.” His wife had proposed his waiting on his nephew, or even meeting him at the station. After such an absence, it seemed the right thing to do. But Sir John saw it otherwise.

“You say we are to dine there—and that on the very night he comes,” said he. “I am sure I wish we were not; but since we must, we must. Well, that will do. One nuisance is enough.”

The nuisance had escaped from his memory, however, when the day came; and about six o'clock he tramped in from the coverts, wet and weary, after a long October day's shooting, expecting nothing less than to be forced to leave his own doors again that night. The sportsmen were three in number, since the two young Mannerses, his sons, had run down for the month. Of these, it may for the present suffice to say, that Bertie, at Aldershot, was expected to reflect credit on his family; while of Jem, at Oxford, it was merely hoped that he would get along as well as many a stupid fellow had done before him.

Moist from the many wettings of a showery afternoon, but radiant from the good luck which had attended their guns in spite of such interruptions, the party now made their way into the drawing-room, where the ladies were sitting over their tea-cups.

“What o’clock is it? How dark it has grown all of a sudden! Surely it must be long past six, though,” cried Jem, while his father and brother examined the letters which the afternoon’s post had brought in for them, and which were ranged on the mantelpiece. Jem seldom had letters. “I say, it’s only just a quarter past,” exclaimed he, peering into the clock’s face, “and scarcely light enough to tell a rat from a weasel! Well, give me some tea, if there is any, Agatha; I don’t mind if there is not.”

There was plenty, but it was cold.

“A pity to spoil your dinner,” observed his father, looking round in time to see the cup filled, and eyeing it, as if, but for the recollection, he would have had no objection to one himself. “Nasty stuff! Very bad for you.”

“I shall have forgotten all about it before dinner,” said Jem. “Eight o’clock, is it, Agatha?”

“Eight o’clock!” repeated his father, in a tone of surprise. “Why should it be eight o’clock? There is no one coming, is there?”

His usual hour was seven, and it was one of the minor grievances of Lady Manners’s life, that when the hour was changed, as it was occasionally, to suit the more fashionable folks who now and then stayed at Wancote, he was certain to let out the fact to their faces. He neither remembered nor cared. His “What time do we dine to-night, eh?” was not even spoken in an aside. But on the evening in question he could not understand what to expect; no one was staying in the house, and they rarely had dinner-parties when alone; he looked at his son in very natural astonishment.

“This is the night we go to Lutteridge, papa,” explained Agatha.

“To Lutteridge!” The mystery indeed was at an end, but dreadful was its ending.

“To Lutteridge!” cried Sir John, looking from one to the other, whilst despair and incredulity strove for the mastery in his countenance. “To Lutteridge!” he repeated, for the third time, and both sons burst out laughing.

“Well, sir, I hope you have taken it in at

length," said the elder, merrily. "That was why I hurried you along at such a pace over the last mile,—I was afraid we should be late."

"You never said a word!"

"I thought you knew. I thought it was later than it was, the evening was so dark; but we shall do very well. Jem and I had a shilling on that it was half-past six when we passed the turnpike. By the way, I owe you that, Jem. Tea, Agatha."

Bertie's demands were always more peremptory than were those of his brother; his "Tea, Agatha," was as characteristic as was Jem's "Give me some if there is any; I don't mind if there is not."

With blackened brow Sir John sat; and the moment his son's voice ceased, the thunder began to roll. "Do very well!" he echoed—"do very well! I—I really don't know what you mean by doing very well! What is it all about, Emily?" turning to his wife. "What nonsense is it they are talking?"

"Why, my dear, you know this is the night of Constance's dinner-party. You spoke of it yourself the other day. You remember I wanted you to call at Lutteridge this afternoon, and you

thought there was no occasion, as we were to dine there so soon."

"Well?" said her husband; "well?"

"Well," replied Lady Manners, smiling with the satisfaction of one who had made good her point, "since you said you would go, you know, you must go."

"But that is not to say I must go *to-night*! To-night is not the night! Of course it is not. Speak, Agatha. Jane, *you* know. It is all a mistake about its being to-night, is it not? I met Constance just the day before yesterday, and I'm positive she said it was Wednesday."

"And this is Wednesday."

"Wednesday? No, this is Tuesday. Is it not Tuesday, Bertie? I told you," turning to the others scornfully, "that you were all wrong. I knew this could not be the day, or I should have remembered it myself. It is detestable having to go at all; but you need not have frightened me," altering his note to one of reproach, "by pretending I was to set off *to-night*."

"It is a pity," said Jane, gently, and glanced at her mother. "I am afraid, my dear——" said she, and looked at Agatha.

“It cannot be helped, papa,” said Agatha, manfully. “I am very sorry, but it really is to-night that we are engaged for, and you will have to go.”

A general sensation of “Bravo! Well done, Agatha!” made Sir John nearly weep.

“I don’t believe it!” he cried. “Bertie, can’t you speak? That Agatha is such a goose she does not know one day of the week from another!” (Agatha was the only person in the house who invariably did.) “Can’t *you* tell her, and perhaps she may believe you, though she won’t me?” continued the poor gentleman.

“She is in the right, sir, all the same.”

“Tchick! Taking her part! You have agreed together to torment me! It really is too bad of them,” turning fretfully to his wife. “They know that if there is one place more than another that I hate to dine at, it is Luttridge; and after a day like this, when I am wet through and tired to death——oh!” with a groan. “Constance will talk, talk, talk—she never knows when to stop, she never leaves you alone for a minute. And nothing but kickshaws for dinner! I am always ill the

next day, you know I am ; why could you not get me off ? ”

“ You told Constance yourself, my dear, that you would go.”

“ I told her that I would go on *Wednesday* ; I never thought that was *to-day*.”

“ I am afraid you will have to go. We are all going, even little Hester ; it is her first formal party ; and Constance made a point of every one of us coming.”

“ Yes, papa, I am to go.” Hester had not before spoken, but the prospect before her was as delightful to her vision as it was distasteful to her father’s. “ I am to go,” said she, gleefully. Agatha has been telling me what a *menu* is, and Jane says I am not to take wine.”

“ She took it every time that it was handed,” explained Jane, in answer to the boys’ laugh and “ What a shame ! ” Jane saw nothing to laugh at. “ It was at uncle Walter’s last month, and Hetty had never dined down-stairs before,” continued she ; “ she thought she ought ; it was not that she wanted it.”

“ Never mind, Het ; take a sly glass when Jane’s head is turned the other way. Poor little

innocent !” said Bertie, in his lordly way. “And so this is only her second appearance ; are you not afraid for her, mamma ?”

“Not at all,” answered his mother with spirit ; “I never was less afraid for any one of you.”

“Has she a gown ?”

“Indeed she has, and a very pretty one.”

“My bridesmaid’s,” subjoined Hester. “You know,—when Gertrude was married.”

“What time are the carriages ordered, Agatha ?” pursued Lady Manners, who often now left arrangements to her eldest daughter.

“I said half-past seven, mamma. I knew we should not all be down to a moment, and it will take us longer to drive to-night, the lanes are so deep in mud.”

“Ay, that they are ! Deep in mud. And yet you want to have two carriages out ! If Hester and I had stayed at home, you could have managed perfectly with one ; Jem could have gone outside.” Sir John had now collapsed, and was sitting heavily in his chair ; the sparkle had left his eye, his shoulders drooped, and his arms hung heavily by his side.

No one cared to take up fresh cudgels, and after a few minutes the mother rose, saying,

“Now we must not run ourselves late. Now, little Hester, run away ; and, boys, do try not to keep us waiting.”

“I take no time,” said Bertie, notoriously the most unpunctual present. “Are you going to see the game laid out, sir?” to his father. “You will hardly have time. I had better send word we shall not go out.”

“I don’t care,” said poor Sir John. “Yes, send word. I little thought I should have this to go through to-night ; it has spoilt all my pleasure. I think you have been very cruel, every one of you ; and,” looking back as he left the room, “after all, I don’t believe it is the day !”

There was no doubt about its being the day at Lutteridge, and by dinner-time all was smooth and smiling there.

But great had been the fears of the hostess during the previous hours, and sincere her regrets that she should have acted in the matter on the impulse of the moment ; for a letter had been received on the previous morning, delaying the arrival of the man whom she meant to honour, and she felt that she ought at least to have ascertained that he was in London before she had reckoned on his arrival at Lutteridge.

But she was not a woman to sit down and wail. Her carriage was at the door, and she herself on the road to the nearest telegraph office within half an hour; and the upshot was that Colonel Lutteridge arrived the next afternoon, and all was right. She had kept her anxiety to herself, and none knew of it. She looked at him almost with affection when he walked in. He had responded to her appeal, and saved her party: that, for the moment was sufficient.

She was now in a happy flutter of importance, secure that her cook was equal to the occasion, that her new dress was becoming, and not even displeased that her brother-in-law was younger-looking than she had expected him to be.

He had not a young manner, she reflected, and youthful looks are nothing without manner.

The handsome presents he had brought her she looked forward to exhibiting during the evening, and nothing could have been more satisfactory than his having forgotten to pay the same attention to his aunt and cousins. He was not indeed aware what cousins he possessed; but when Lady Manners was mentioned, it evi-

dently struck him for the first time that he had been remiss.

In the hurry of departure the near neighbourhood of the family had been overlooked, and while Constance's letters had served to keep her prominently before his mind's eye, there had never been much in them to stir up his memory with regard to the others. She wrote lively and entertaining epistles, and even such as knew Mrs Robert Lutteridge's faculty for turning a fact upside down, might give some degree of credit to the statement that her brother-in-law had sought the correspondence ; but in all she wrote, she herself, or her children, or matters connected with the estate, alone figured with any prominence.

Simon was now annoyed with himself for having neglected relations to whom something was due ; but his half-jesting suggestion that the shawls and boxes beside them should be put aside before the evening, not being favourably received, he could say no more. Constance was mistress of the situation ; he was despatched to his room with many injunctions not to be late, and she had only herself to think about.

Her little Ellen, a harmless child of eight, not

pretty, went for nothing. Ellen would appear in a white frock before dinner, and be taken possession of by some shy man; but as she was a plaintive, well-behaved little thing, as far removed from the *enfant terrible* as it was possible for a child to be, she could not cause anxiety to any one.

Jack was his mother's darling; like herself he was fair and handsome, and in consideration of his looks, his abilities, and his being the heir of Lutteridge, she condoned the fact that she had a son twelve years old.

He was now at Eton, and Constance was ready primed with exploits, achievements, and masters' opinions, all duly medicated for the uncle's ear.

The readiness with which she was listened to increased her good-humour on the evening in question. She hummed a tune as she tripped along the passage to the nursery in time to let the nurse know to put on Miss Ellen's sash of a shade to match her own dress; then she summoned her maid and was ready in a trice.

Everything she wore was new, pretty, and becoming, and so satisfactory was the verdict of the looking-glass on the completion of her toilet, that she was fain to linger before it for a moment and wonder what Simon would think.

That he too should look young was provoking. He did not look a day older than when she had last seen him ; but she supposed, with a smile, that it was no fault of his ; and certainly she, of all others, was the last person who had a right on this point to say anything.

CHAPTER III.

CONSTANCE HAS HER WISH.

“ Decks with a huge bouquet her breast,
And flaunting, fluttering up and down,
Looks at herself, and cannot rest.”

—LONGFELLOW.

THE host and hostess had been down for nearly twenty minutes before their expected guests began to arrive.

Colonel Lutteridge, one of the most punctual of men, was fully aware, when he was hustled off to dress by his sister-in-law, that she had sent him too soon,—but he had reckoned on her being late; and having promptly despatched his toilet, he had descended to take a leisurely survey of the rooms, at a time when he could recall associations, and conjure up past scenes unobserved.

But this was not to be.

Constance had been equally on the alert, she

too having designed to review her field of action without a disturbing presence, and she too having calculated on being able to do so, from the conclusion that so recently-arrived a traveller would be in no hurry to quit his dressing-room fire.

She was busy adding a few finishing touches to the arrangement of plants in front of one of the long mirrors, when the opening door revealed Simon's tall figure, and also his sudden, his involuntary halt at sight of her; and perhaps even the resplendent vision whose reflection first caught his eye was less distasteful to him than was his black-coated apparition in the doorway to her.

He could afford to wait; but for her, the present was her only time. She wished to collect herself—to be sure that she exactly remembered who were coming, and to take in the whole importance and gratification of the moment.

However, there was nothing now for it but to compliment him on his celerity, and to await his response on her own. She was prepared with her “Dear, I really thought I had dawdled! It seemed to have been an age! My poor maid got quite a scolding; for, to be

sure, she can be quick if she likes!" But, some alterations in the apartment catching his attention, he merely replied to her first arch address, by comments on them, and appeared neither to be thinking of her nor of himself.

"So unobserving," murmured she, discontentedly. "However," with reviving spirits, "perhaps, all things considered, he could not have a better fault."

Fidgeting as she now was with impatience and excitement, it was a severe strain to have to talk sober sense to a man who appeared to have no nervousness on his own account, and to be perfectly insensible of hers.

She could ill sustain her part in the conversation, when every gust of wind seemed to bring the roll of wheels beneath the window, and when in every movement of her companion she could fancy she detected the echo of the distant door-bell. Lutteridge was a house in which the door-bell penetrated to the farthest extremities—nowhere less audible, it is true, than in the great saloon in which they were now sitting; but still even there it might just be heard.

The house was perforated by so many passages, and along these and on the staircases

there was so much uncarpeted oak, that the sound was only deadened by the distance it had to travel, not lost.

No summons, however, did in reality reach the ears now on the stretch until two minutes to the hour.

For the last ten, Constance had scarcely spoken, and had been almost annoyed at the non-entrance of her child, who, although usually looked on in the light of an interruption, might, in the present instance, have been a help.

“The only time she ever was late in her life,” muttered the mother. But even at the moment when she was inwardly fulminating anathemas at the head of the nurse who had been thus inopportunately at fault, the unmistakable though faint and far-off clang-clang made her rise, not more pleased to begin the real business of the evening, than to put an end to the *tête-à-tête*. She was beginning to feel a little awe of her companion.

He would do excellently well to stand by her side and be presented to her guests; and in the renewed anticipation of their curiosity, their surprise, and their undoubted deference, she glanced

at her Colonel with all the pride of possession—but she did not exactly care to be alone with her brother-in-law.

She could not make him out.

There was no fault to be found with anything he said, if only he had not left so much unsaid. She gave him openings and he passed them by : he took no hints, followed up no suggestions.

She wondered if she wearied him ; she had never tried harder in her life to please any one ; she had racked her brains to think of things he might like to hear ; and, harder still, had restrained herself from uttering a word that he might not like. She had striven to be good-natured on all subjects—had even said as much in favour of Lady Manners and her daughters as she could force her tongue to say. He should have no chance of thinking as men do think—that women pick to pieces behind backs ; or if he did, he should perforce make her an exception to the rule.

It was well done, and she knew it ; but the smile which brought her little pale girl at once to her uncle's side, had not so far been bestowed on the mother.

Constance, however, seldom stopped to think.

She meant Simon to like her, therefore, of course, he must like her. Whatever might be said of Mrs Lutteridge, to her face she had a host of open admirers, and she might almost be excused for imagining, as she reflected on the flattery and admiration which invariably attended her, that she had but to put forth her hand to conquer.

She was scarcely even puzzled by her brother-in-law's indifference. She settled it that he was shy; and happily the reflection came in time to restore her spirits to their proper pitch, as she moved forward to receive her guests.

In their countenances she read enough to maintain these — nay, even to cause an additional glow.

In her secret soul she was well aware, to be sure, that there was nothing to elate in the fact that the master of Lutteridge had returned to his home, a young, handsome man, instead of the worn-out soldier she had led everybody to expect; but where is the woman who, in the presence of a momentary triumph, will not disregard ulterior evils?

She would not have had her brother-in-law an inch shorter for the world.

It was quite a touching sight to behold the

pretty widow nestling by the side of her tall companion, looking up into his face, laying her little hand upon his arm,—so pleased, and proud, and gay.

“Go away again? Oh dear, she hoped not! *That* was never to be mentioned! There was no idea of such a thing.”

Indeed it had been one of the very first points on which she had sounded him: it had only succeeded to her tender inquiries after his health. He had answered both satisfactorily, if not to her, at least to himself: he was well and strong, and proposed settling at the Manor for the rest of his days.

Whatever might be her secret feelings, she was now all animation on this, as on every other point.

“Rather a mistake taking him for an invalid!” she whispered to Lady Manners; then aloud to all, “There are people in the world whom one can just do without, when one is obliged to do without them; but when once they appear”—with a charming expressiveness—“they really cannot be spared again. Colonel Lutteridge cannot be spared again, Lady Westmacott; you must tell him so, in the name of us all.”

She was rather put out that Lord Westmacott had not come. He had been called away at the last moment, and no time had been allowed to let her know; it was tiresome, the absence of a defaulter of such prominence might well have disconcerted any hostess; she was obliged, even while talking aloud to her guests, to be conning over in her mind how she was to rearrange them at the dinner-table.

Sir John Manners must now of course take her in; he was no worse off than he would have been before, as it was inevitable that he must sit on the left, if not on the right hand, but he chose to be aggrieved afresh. He would at least, he said inwardly, if Westmacott had been there, have been let alone in the interval before dinner; he wanted to take a good look at his nephew, as well as to pay him a little of the attention due to him as head of his family, and colonel of his regiment; but Constance gave him no opportunity.

As soon as her circle was complete—and in spite of Agatha's forethought, the Manners's party was the last to arrive—she devoted herself to her uncle, as to the principal gentleman present; and after a few minutes he was, as he had fore-

told, desired to take her to the dining-room. He had no time for more than the hasty conclusion, "A determined-looking fellow," ere he was separated from his nephew by the entire length of the table.

Those who had come earlier were more fortunate. In the fitful pauses of the "long half-hour," they were able to satisfy such curiosity as could be satisfied by gazing to the full.

Colonel Lutteridge did not sit down, and seemed, as no doubt he was, perfectly unaware of the interest he excited. The people did not stare, you see, they only chattered very fast, and found the fire hot, and pulled their chairs about, and were so delighted to see each other that they had to move from one place to another several times—and so they got views of the stranger on all sides.

He was certainly worth looking at. His person was striking, and his features perfectly regular; but his countenance would have been more generally attractive had it not been for the gravity which overbore, and seemed habitual to it.

No mouth could have been more beautifully formed, but the lips were locked together, unless

when in the act of speaking; and his eyes, which were magnificently large and soft, had an absent look, which could scarcely be found flattering. In manner his repose was absolute, but it approached too nearly that of a statue. All felt there was a want; he had no life, no animation.

It was too probable that the complaisance he had shown in hurrying his arrival in order to be present, — a complaisance which Mrs Robert Lutteridge was vaunting on all sides, — was due rather to a sense of duty than to any expectation of pleasure.

It was, in fact, even so: his military career had made him regard all engagements as sacred, to be fulfilled if possible, at whatever cost, and as she had answered for him, he would be there. He would not leave her in the lurch, nor would he even pass animadversions on her behaviour. She had meant well, he supposed, and perhaps it was the right thing to do; he did not understand such matters.

But he was as particular not to fail her, as if he were due at a military durbar or native banquet. He stood by her side, as she had ordained that he should, rather less comfortable,

it is true, than if he had been in uniform, with his sword to lay hold of,—but nevertheless stately, unconscious, perfectly indifferent to anything ludicrous or unusual in the situation.

Lady Manners felt more than ever that she could not call him “Simon,” as, in the few minutes which elapsed before they went to dinner, she took covert glances upwards, from the sofa where she sat in heavy converse with another matron.

He did not look young of his years to her, as was perhaps natural. She was herself barely fifty, and had, so far, scarcely realised that her brother’s son could be within twelve years of her own age. She almost blushed at Constance’s unnecessary “Your nephew, aunt.”

Why should it have been so emphatically uttered? Of course he was her nephew; but although she had begged Sir John to remember the fact in his greeting, she had not herself intended to do more than merely shake hands as the others would. It was in compliance with her eldest daughter’s acknowledged sense of decorum that she had agreed to add the “I am glad to see you at home again,” which finally faltered from her lips, and was never heard by anybody.

She felt that Agatha was right, and wished that she had had the courage to speak louder.

She was conscious afterwards of having almost whispered, and was not altogether easy at the recollection; but the more she looked at the person for whom the greeting had been intended, the more she wondered at her having been able to deliver it at all. She had never seen so unresponsive a face.

It was enough to chill any feeling she might hitherto have entertained, or have hoped to entertain for her nephew—enough, at any rate, to check the slightest expression of it: as to a second essay of welcome, such as Agatha might have recommended, her very soul sickened at the thought. Whatever was said on the subject, nothing should induce her to tell such a falsehood again; glad to see him back, she certainly was not!

In the evening, however, she was surprised to find him seated by her side, and a little of this feeling wore away in conversation. It is hardly possible for any woman to be sought out by the great man for the nonce, and not, ere long, to be easy with him—at any rate, for the passing hour.

Lady Manners was astonished to find that she could actually both breathe and speak in the neighbourhood of her terrible kinsman.

He did not, to be sure, say much, but he did what was infinitely better—he smiled.

When he smiled she lost, for the time, half her tremors. To be sitting there, in view of all, and have him paying her this tribute, was enough to gratify, it must be owned; and in the strength and fulness of the moment, she asked him forthwith to Wancote.

“When are we to see you at Wancote?” was distinctly caught by Constance, as she tripped past to beg for Agatha and Jane’s duet. It was not a welcome sound. She had known, of course, that such an invitation must be forthcoming, and was indifferent to it, but not so to the tone in which it was spoken. Reproaching herself for forgetting that “blood is thicker than water,” and that the blood in question was the same which flowed in her own veins, Lady Manners had striven to throw into the words some of the warmth, some of the kindness, which had been so conspicuously absent from her first greeting. He had responded with cordiality, “And now she looks quite gay,” murmured

Constance. Her aunt's miserable face during the meal, as she strove, and strove in vain, to make something of her magnificent nephew, at whose left hand she found herself placed, had not escaped the notice of the hostess.

Constance had laughed to herself, and had done all she could to deepen the impression afterwards. Simon had taken in Lady Westmacott, who, it was supposed, might have been able, at any rate, in her own county, to cope with anybody who crossed her path.

Even Lady Westmacott—a portly dame, possessed of equal dignity of mien, and far more knowledge of the world than Lady Manners,—even she was checkmated.

Both dowagers had had a wretched time of it; and the relief they experienced, when at length the signal for rising was given, was simultaneous.

For that night at least the aunt dreamt of no further intercourse with her nephew; and when he drew near her sofa she might be flattered, but she certainly was frightened. He had talked to her for nearly twenty minutes before she had summoned courage to ask him to Wancote.

Having promised to come, he had next to

open the piano and stand beside Agatha, as Jane played the accompaniment for their song.

The heavily-curtained room was too severe a tax upon their fresh young voices ; but it may be doubted whether to that or to the near presence of their cousin was due the feebleness of the performance.

Agatha attributed the failure solely to Simon.

“I can always sing very well in that room, she explained afterwards, in an aggrieved voice. “I don’t mind the curtains ; it is nonsense to say curtains make so much difference ; but it was enough to make any one nervous to have a man standing close by your side, with his arms folded, and a look of attention that might have made one fancy one’s self a public singer ! Did you not feel it, Jane ? I could hardly get out the high notes at all !”

“You certainly did not sing particularly well,” confessed Jane ; “but,” she added, kindly, “I have heard you do worse. I do not think it had anything to do with Simon, Agatha : it was just that you did not begin well, and then you could not go on well.”

She was felt to have disposed of the question by all but her eldest sister.

“But why did I not begin well?” said she. “Because he was there. Another time I shall ask him to go away. Was it very bad, mamma? Hester, what did you think?”

Neither of them had thought about it. As is usually the case, the performers themselves had been more sensible of their deficiency than had any one else; and though Bertie did observe, off-hand, “I wish, another time, you would sing something you *can* do, Agatha, and not frighten us by threatening a full stop every minute,” the remark gave keener mortification than he was the least aware of. As soon as it was over, none but the Misses Manners themselves remembered that they had sung at all. The company were not musical.

Bertie himself was more silent than usual on the homeward drive. He had made one or two little advances towards his cousin, which had been somewhat absently responded to, and he did not feel that he had been honoured with any particular notice.

Now Mr Manners did not like to be passed over. He thought that people ought to see a difference between him and the rest of his family, and feel that, while they were very good sort of

country folks, he was a young man of the period. He felt that it was only due to himself to be thus discriminated, and was unwilling to lose time in making his newly-found relation understand this.

It proved to be a task beyond his strength. Colonel Lutteridge, after the ladies had left, talked principally to his uncle, and bracketed the sons in the civilities he proffered : he was not remiss, but he appeared to be undiscerning.

The provoking part was, that there was nothing one could take hold of ; Bertie, like Constance, found his grievance vanish directly he attempted to grasp it : he could scarcely even to himself allow that his vanity alone had suffered.

Of course everybody outwardly lauded Colonel Lutteridge to the skies.

Each felt that to have it thought that he or she had not found their host agreeable would never do ; each was eager to make him out as charming as he was handsome, as friendly as he was courteous.

Thus, at every " Good-bye," Constance smiled back to some congratulatory whisper, until at length, when the last guest had departed, and

the last carriage had rolled from the door, she met her brother-in-law, as he returned to the room, with the unexpected ejaculation, "Simon, you have won all hearts!"

But either the hearts were not felt to be won, or to be worth the winning — coupled with Simon's smile was a yawn, which, although he strove to suppress it, escaped him before he was aware.

Constance sat down upon the ottoman to review the evening, and began to sum up with the volubility which a quick memory and still quicker observation could furnish. She had not a fault to find. She wished to be permitted to expatiate; to remember who praised this, and who had admired that; she was bursting with information as to the opinions she had gleaned from one and another, and could scarce refrain from telling Simon to his face that Mrs Martin had pronounced him to be the very handsomest man she had ever seen.

Mrs Martin, on the strength of being now a married woman, felt herself at liberty to make such remarks. She patronised the daughters of the houses at which she visited, and called them "you girls." She only danced square dances,

and the half of these with her husband; in short, she enjoyed to the full the satisfaction of feeling herself to be young, pretty, and a bride, yet the quintessence of propriety and self-abnegation.

No one laughed more heartily at Mrs Martin than Constance. Constance, who went here, there, and everywhere, joined in every diversion, and renounced no portion of the devil and his works, was amused to the last degree by little Mrs Prunes-and-Prism, as she designated the bride. She herself had no mind to bear the stamp of "married" on her brow; and as, to do her justice, she looked sufficiently youthful and agile to be taken for any age, it was not surprising that she was often paid the compliment of exaggerated surprise on the part of strangers, when she talked, as she did now and then, of "My great boy at Eton."

Her manner alone betrayed her to observant eyes. There was a self-reliance, an independence, which single women rarely attain until middle life is entered on, but which the wife or widow earlier acquire.

She had nothing in common with Mrs Martin, and would have scorned to heed what she said

on an ordinary occasion ; but to the success of such an evening, even Mrs Martin could add her mite. For some time she kept it valiantly to herself, but at length it slipped out in the ardour of the moment, and no sooner were the words uttered than they were repented of.

She saw her mistake.

Still, such a mistake could not provoke lasting harm ; he might look coldly on her for the moment, but he could not cherish resentment ; he might question her taste, but he could not her good-nature. Since he said nothing, she would hope for the best. Presently she bade him a good-humoured “ good night,” and, as to this he responded with alacrity, she took herself and her finery off to bed, without feeling that she had injured herself in his opinion.

Alone, her reflections were now of that mixed nature which may be supposed to attend a schemer, who, though successful for the moment, sees in front a difficult and dangerous path.

Now that the *éclat* of Simon’s arrival was over, she had to face the disagreeables ; she could no longer shut her eyes to the future.

For that one evening all had gone well ; she

alone had held the strings of the puppet-show, and moved them as she would. She had gloried in displaying her ease, her intimacy, and perfectly good understanding, with one whom no one else could venture to approach in like manner. Aware of the impression he was making, she had been bent on showing herself at home with him ; he was treated with a freedom which had not been accorded him in private ; she was now not only easy, but familiar.

His arm was tapped, confidences were breathed up to his ear, and he was told what he was to do, with a certainty that he would do it, which was quite engaging.

He had submitted, obeyed his mentor, permitted her caressing fingers, and his phlegm had been proof against it all.

But she could not discover that she had advanced a step in his good graces. He looked charming, to be sure, or she would long before have pronounced that he was not worth the trouble he gave. "So distinguished-looking!" she murmured. "Such fine eyes! That air *distrain* is perfectly fascinating. Robert had something of it ; but he was not the man in point of appearance that Simon is. I don't wonder at

that little twopenny-halfpenny Mrs Martin; I am inclined to agree with her. It is to be hoped, however," she reflected, in some dismay, "that we are singular in our opinion: it would never do to have it generally received. Oh dear!" (prolonged sigh). . . . "I must make the best of it; but I had no idea of the sort of man he was. The only comfort is that there must be two words to the bargain; and as he has been so long without marrying again, we may hope he will stand out to the end. Surely," she mused, "he must have had thousands of opportunities. Why should I fancy that he is to be stricken down at the bare sight of these simple country girls, when he must have stood sieges from beauties, wits, and fortunes! There, I am talking like a book! And after all, I can do no good. If it is to be, it is to be, and there is an end of the matter. I won't think of it."

She could, however, think of nothing else.

She was excited and restless. Simon, standing by the piano, or talking to his aunt, was ever before her eyes. True, he had not been for any length of time either at one post or the other; he had slipped away during the sisters'

second performance, and he had talked to Mrs Martin quite as much as to Lady Manners.

But then Mrs Martin was a very safe young person indeed—not a dowager, with three bright, pleasant, marriageable daughters.

“Of course it will be Agatha if it is any,” cogitated the watcher; “and of course, if he means to marry at all, it will be one. He seems to have been brought to their very door on purpose. So tiresome! I had hoped that both Agatha and Jane would have been out of the way long before now. I was only twenty when I was married, and Agatha is twenty-four! Even Jane is older than I was, and Hetty is coming on too. To be sure, they are not marvellously beautiful—not likely to set the Thames on fire with their loveliness; but still they are pretty, they are attractive, they are popular with most people; and they see good society, if not very much of it. I don’t understand how it is. Three of them! I should not care to trail three grown-up daughters about after me, I must say. Hester is the cleverest, but Agatha is the best-looking. If he takes to any, it will be Agatha, to a certainty!”

In both of her estimates Constance was right; as to her prophecy, we shall see.

Agatha was a bright-complexioned, fully-formed blonde, with a well-cut nose and chin; and wherever she went, the impression she made was immediate.

Jane was less striking in countenance, but her figure was elegant, and she had a gentle expression which could not fail to please.

Of Hester there were as yet more predictions than positive opinions. So far she was only a rosy, large-eyed, brown little girl, who looked almost too young to be out of short frocks.

Each of the three, in her own way, filled a niche in the family circle. Agatha was the wise one, Jane the loving one, Hester the pet.

Disputants appealed to Agatha, culprits to Jane. Father and mother alike turned to their second daughter when refractory sons were to be admonished, or by persuasion brought to repentance. Hester could but weep with the offender; Agatha would lecture and harden his heart; Jane alone could bring him subdued and in his right mind to the parent's side.

In practical matters, however, Miss Manners

took the lead ; she it was who decided what was what in nice points of etiquette or expenditure ; and although her mind was not strictly intellectual, nor could she be termed more than tolerably accomplished, she was a well-informed, properly educated, and indeed, as Constance would often observe, a “ superior person.”

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG FOR THEIR YEARS.

“Why must everything smack of man and be mannish? Is the world all grown up? Is childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and best some of the child’s heart left to respond to its earliest enchantments?”—LAMB.

CONSTANCE, to be sure, was a universal mocker; but what she said in jest was nevertheless true.

With no one had the opinion of her eldest daughter more weight than with Lady Manners; and the knowledge that while obeying Agatha’s injunction as to giving her nephew a welcome, to the letter, she had lamentably failed in the spirit, made her uneasy.

If he had caught the sound of her voice at all, which was more than doubtful, it must have reached him in an inarticulate murmur, calculated to produce no feeling save that of mystification.

“I did say it,” she affirmed, however. “I did

not like saying it at all ; but I did it because Agatha wished me."

Agatha demurred. If the words had not been uttered so as to be heard by any one—not even so that she herself, who was close behind, and knew they were to be spoken, could catch a syllable—they might as well have been left unsaid.

But this was hard to bear.

It had cost the shy, stately dame some effort to speak in the first instance : had the words been the spontaneous effusion of the moment, they would have flowed easily and pleasantly ; but, as it happened, she had learned them by rote, like a parrot, and they were absolutely meaningless, consequently difficult to utter.

She disliked to feel herself dishonest, and had at first objected to the phrase prepared for her as savouring of hypocrisy ; but her feelings had been worked upon, and she had been at last brought to allow that she was glad—perhaps—that her nephew should return.

"At least," said Agatha, "you would not like him to feel that you were *not*. That would be what he must imagine if nothing is said by any one, and that would be really untrue."

This was allowed ; and as even Sir John, finding that it was not he who was expected to do anything, had observed, " I daresay Agatha is right," his wife had given in her adherence.

But having gone through the ordeal, she was prepared to defend herself, and spoke of it with spirit.

She had done, she affirmed, what none of the others had. It was very easy to talk about relationship, but when a full-grown man confronts you as a perfect stranger, and you know nothing in the world about him except that he is your brother's son, it is impossible to rush at him with open arms. As for those behind her, not one of them had had the courage to say a word !

There was no gainsaying this. Even Bertie, whose spirit was not supposed to be easily quelled, had found his little phrase sink out of sight when the moment for delivering it had arrived, and one after the other they had shaken hands in solemn silence, with the exception of little Hester, who had looked up sparkish and bright into her cousin's face, saying, " How d'ye do ? " in a little chirpy voice that nearly made her father, who was next to her, die with laughing afterwards.

He took her off to her face. "How d'ye do?" he cried. "That was the way she said it. How d'ye do? Hetty, look here, 'How d'ye do?' The monkey! In its little high voice! Mamma was frightened, and so were all the rest, but no one can say that he had not a word from the little one. 'How d'ye do?' Ha! ha! ha!"

But even while Sir John, happy in the relief of a disagreeable duty accomplished, was rubbing his hands over his joke, more troubles were in store for him. Colonel Lutteridge must be asked to Wancote, Lady Manners proudly retailed her general invitation, and the question now was whether he should be invited in state as a neighbour for the next Monday, or brought in impromptu as a nephew for the same evening.

Bertie was in the full tide of laying down the law—even his mother and Agatha could not be allowed to know, while he was there—when Simon himself was seen walking up the slope straight to the hall door.

Bertie was there before him. It was Bertie's delight to receive guests, convey them across the hall, wonder where everybody was, order up luncheon, and show himself cock of the walk

generally—in other words, the eldest son and embryo baronet dispensing hospitality in the halls one day to be his own.

In the present instance he was defrauded of much enjoyment by the fact that all the party were assembled in the drawing-room when he ushered in his cousin, and that the luncheon-gong sounded at the moment of his opening the door.

He could still, on the pretext of the servants being dismissed to their own mid-day meal, bustle around Colonel Lutteridge's chair, ask whether he would have wine or beer, wonder that there was no venison on the side-table, and complain that the plates were cold.

But he could do no more. He could not wait on everybody, and the only vacant seat, when he wished to sit down, was out of his cousin's range of vision.

Sir John, while disdaining anything of a solid lunch, partook of his own pudding, which was placed at his elbow, and all demonstrations of attention on his son's part were peremptorily checked by a wave of his hand, for he was soon interested in what his guest was saying.

Simon had come to ask advice on several

matters, and it was such advice as Sir John dearly loved to give. His brow cleared, his voice softened, he grew all that he was when in company congenial to him, and ever after he continued to treat his nephew "as a young fellow."

Nor was Colonel Lutteridge less successful with the lads. He had not only come early, in the hope of finding his uncle at home—he wished to engage them all to shoot with him on the following day.

Sir John was engaged—his duties as a magistrate could not give way even to partridges and pheasants—but Bertie and Jem accepted the proposal with eagerness. Ways and means were soon settled, and it only remained to be seen whether the sportsmen should finish their day at Wancote or at Lutteridge.

Now was Lady Manners's opportunity. She knew what was expected of her, and had she been alone could have delivered her invitation with dignity: no one usually was more happy in her method of performing a courtesy. But the pause, the authoritative eye of her eldest son, the expressive looks of her daughters, and the unconsciousness of the guest, all served to embarrass her.

She feared she knew not what; and the civility, if such it could be termed, was at length hurried into, and brought forth with a trepidation which would have astonished any spectator not already prepared with foregone conclusions.

In it Constance would have detected deep and sinister meaning; in it little Mrs Martin would have found endless source of conjecture; in it almost any one present, who did not know the speaker, would have seen something more than what lay on the surface; and scarcely any would have seen the truth.

No one in the world deserved less the title of a match-making mother than did Lady Manners, and no one was more afraid of it. Fear drove her to the other extreme. The more suitable the match, the less would she see of the man; the more likely he was to attract, the less opportunity should be vouchsafed him for proving attractive.

She invited her nephew to the house, with a look that ought to have driven him from it.

Either he did not see the look, or it did not affect him, for he gave a ready assent, and then the party adjourned to the drawing-room.

The afternoon was fine, and since no shooting

was to be done, it remained to be seen how the gentlemen were to amuse themselves. Sir John accepted a seat in his wife's landau, as he had a neighbour to see at some distance, and a riding-party for the others was talked about.

Colonel Lutteridge was offered a mount: Bertie's bay hunter was in the act of being pressed upon him, but he had not been allowed to say that he preferred a walk, when an interruption occurred.

A party of riders went past the window, and proved to be acquaintances who lived at a distance and were seldom seen, and who had now come over in the hope of inducing the Miss Mannenses to ride back with them.

They were brought in to eat such of the luncheon as was available, and the proposal being agreed to, Agatha and Jane hastened upstairs to don their habits.

Bertie, now regretting his urgency of the moment before, again, but in a different manner, proffered his horse to his cousin. Simon was, however, this time allowed to know his own mind, and since he absolutely disclaimed any desire to ride, all was right. He hurried away to make himself smart, and only Jem and

Hester, the two youngest and most insignificant of the family, were left to entertain Colonel Lutteridge in the drawing-room.

“What are you going to do this afternoon?” said Simon, suddenly addressing himself to the pair.

“Eh?” said Jem, starting.

“Aren’t you hatching a scheme?” said his cousin, coming forward.

Well, yes, they were. At least it was nothing of a scheme; it was only that Hetty and he were going to look for cedar-cones in the Manor woods: it was not quite time for them, but some were sure to have been knocked down by the late gales.

Both were shamefaced, evidently considering the amusement unworthy their mature years, and Jem hastened to add, as including an occupation more manly, “But we are going to take the dogs for a run and a swim first.”

“May I come?”

Come with them! With the two left behind to follow their own devices! Partake of their humble sport, when he might have joined the great ones, who would have been only too proud of such companionship!

The brother and sister scarcely knew their own voices in the solemn assent they gave, yet even while feeling the honour, they would gladly have dispensed with it.

Their walk was spoilt—knocked on the head. They would have to talk to him, to attend to him, to point out this and that—worst of all, to go round to the gates, where for years they had leaped the fences.

No fence-jumping would do in the presence of this stately colonel, and down came Miss Hester for her walk, with as demure a step as if she had never in the course of her life heard of such an impropriety.

She and Jem were as uncomfortable as it was possible for the two young creatures to be.

In general, neither of them was afflicted in this respect,—Hester from a general feeling of acceptance, from the amount of popularity which in her small way she enjoyed—Jem from native modesty. As he never pushed forward, he could scarcely know a rebuff; in the background he was at home, at ease, and contented; and he was generally in the background.

Had he been asked beforehand if he would mind taking a walk with his cousin, he would

have answered that since it was his cousin's own look-out, since he had himself proposed coming, he saw no earthly reason why he, Jem, should mind. Had he of his own accord invited Simon, that would have been a different thing ; he would have bitten his tongue out sooner than have done that.

Nevertheless there was something appalling in the silence with which the three set forth, and the boy's heart sank, in spite of himself.

Hester, he thought, ought to talk. He had reckoned on her talking. While he ran round to see the dogs coupled and let loose, he had taken comfort in the reflection that such a chat-box would be sure to find something to say.

But behold, Hester was as mute as a mouse ! She laughed a little, it is true, as the dogs barked about her in the wild delight of their release ; and told their names, and patted their heads while her cousin, with an interest that gave hopes of a thaw, inquired and commented.

But all too soon so fair a beginning fell away, and a full mile had been traversed ere anything beyond a few questions and answers, broken ejaculations, and calls to Dash, Duke, and Gyp had been arrived at.

Gradually, however, things began to brighten, moods to change.

It was one of those fresh, dazzling October days, which continually surprise the beholder with new and unexpected beauties: ruddy copses glowed in the sunlight, and far as the eye could reach, a vast undulating plain faded into blue mist.

The air was crisp and exhilarating; it was not in human nature, certainly not in youthful human nature, to walk at a brisk pace through the pleasant uplands without experiencing a buoyancy of spirits which made silence impossible. Hester began to break it.

She had not much to say, poor child, but she had little bits of intelligence to give, fractions of information for the benefit of her cousin, reminders wherewith to assail her brother.

“Jem, don’t forget about Mrs Hewson.”

“No. Remind me coming back.”

“We can’t take the dogs into the woods, Jem.”

Jem smiled. That, he thought, he might have been allowed to recollect for himself.

“Where will you leave them?” pursued she.

“At the farm. I will take them round directly.”

“Don’t you think the view from this bridge pretty?” said Hester, turning to her other companion, timidly. “People,” she added, with some pride, “often come a long way to stand where you are standing. On a very clear day we can see the cathedral tower just over the river.”

“And how far is that?”

“Thirteen miles.”

“Will you and Hester wait here?” suggested Jem. “It will hardly take me a minute longer to run round with the dogs from here, than it would if we went along—you know where, Hetty. And I shall know better where to find you if you stay on the bridge.”

Off he ran, and—awful moment—she was left alone with her cousin!

She was dumb with horror; she had not thought of this.

As long as Jem was there it was not quite so bad; though not much of a help, Jem was at least a third person, and she knew that that third person was as miserable as herself.

It was unkind in him to desert her—mean of Jem to run off so gaily, knowing to what a fate he had left her.

Why could they not all have gone together? What did it signify if the farm were one hundred, or two or three hundred yards off? The additional few steps were nothing to her, as he very well knew; even had they been, it would have been infinitely preferable to this.

She had nothing to do, and nothing now to say, and her companion apparently had no intentions of helping her out.

Perhaps he was at this moment voting the walk a mistake, wishing himself out of it, and resolving not to let himself in for the like again. Perhaps he was thinking her stupid and tiresome.

How should she be otherwise? She did not know how to make conversation, like Agatha; and she had never been anywhere, and had never seen anything.

How was she, then, to help it?

Had he looked at her he would have seen her forehead wrinkled into a frown of vexation, but as it happened, he was neither looking at her nor thinking of her. He was gazing around, and beneath; on the broad level turf with which, on one side, the Wancote park began, and on the avenue of stately oaks which stretched

behind the iron gates of Lutteridge on the other.

In front still further beauties riveted the eye. A long sweep of the river, lit up and quivering in gold and silver flakes of light, moved with indistinguishable current among its sedgy islands and bending willows. Over it the swallows were still skimming, and now and then a lazy boatman paddled along the banks.

It was so English, so home-like, so different from any scene to which he had for years been accustomed, that Colonel Lutteridge, who was of a dreamy, susceptible nature, may be pardoned for being at the moment so engrossed as to forget all else in the new sensations it inspired. Jem's breathless "I hope I have not kept you waiting," alone recalled him to a knowledge of his other cousin's presence.

"I beg your pardon," he said to her, waking up; "I am afraid I have been dreaming. I—I really did not remember you were there."

She liked him for forgetting, was pleased at such a tribute to nature, and, looking up in his face, longed to tell him so, but could not. They now moved towards a side gate, and after about ten minutes' stroll through the woods, reached

the cedars. It was not until this luckless moment that the reflection occurred to the would-be marauders that the spoil which they contemplated bringing away belonged of right to their companion.

The awkward absurdity of the situation now flashed on both, and both were instantly aware that he had seen it from the beginning.

When he had first been informed of their destination, and seen the value they placed on the booty, he had been amused; but he was still more so now, when his eye fell upon the boy and girl who, with crestfallen faces, were making a feint of fatigue in order to escape embarrassment.

Hester leaned against the giant stem of the tree, it being too damp to sit down: Jem appeared to be lost in sudden meditation.

“Well?” said Simon, looking from one to the other—“well?”

Hester took him off afterwards. She said he gave his head a little jerk to one side, and that one eye went up, and one corner of his mouth went down, and that, in short, he looked, taking him all in all, exceedingly like a half-awakened cockatoo. And then the little witch mimicked his “Well?” to the life.

Jem never could hear her without laughing, although he affirmed that he had never felt less inclined to laugh than he did at the time.

Of course cedar-cones are not much, still one would not willingly pick pebbles off a man's own ground in his presence without saying "By your leave;" and to have asked leave after bringing their cousin to the spot with the avowed intention of purloining his property, would have been, it must be allowed, droll.

It might have been done, of course. A saucy smile, a mock reverence, and a jest would have made the whole thing simple; but Hester, who could be saucy enough, Heaven knows! on occasion, was now as much engaged as her fright would permit of, in making a mental note of the scene, which found expression, as we have said, afterwards.

It was, however, impossible not to say something; and at length, in solemn, tremulous accents, which rang in Simon's ears afterwards, and brought a smile to his face whenever he thought of them, came the apology.

"Jem and I have always come here, but perhaps you would rather that we did not, now."

Colonel Lutteridge looked at the speaker with

a covert amusement which did not appear. She had no idea that she was at least as great a curiosity to him as he was to her, and that though he was not likely to mimic afterwards, as she did, he often repeated, with an inward laugh, the scene to himself.

“By all means, come ; wherever and whenever you please. I am the stranger here ; you are the residents,” he said, with his old-fashioned politeness ; “it is for you to tell me the ways of the place.”

Still in the pretty speech there was not the pleasantry of his “Well ?” He had been nearer making friends with them at that moment than afterwards. They seemed to him such shy, wild creatures that he was afraid every moment of scaring them afresh ; whereas if he had only been less afraid—but the reader will understand how each was acting on the other, and instead of lessening, increasing the difficulty.

“Would you like to have them for yourself ?” suggested Hester, next. “We can gather them all the same, you know,” she added, earnestly.

“That will do,” subjoined Jem, with evident relief.

“Thank you. Well, I will go shares, then.”

“And you can have all the large ones.”

“Certainly not.”

“But we have numbers at home,” pleaded little Hester; “we have huge ones in the drawing-room, and in mamma’s room; it was only Jem and I who wanted them for ourselves to-day, and we would much, *much* rather you had them,—would we not, Jem?”

What age could they be, these funny people? Hester, Simon thought, might be fifteen or so—Jem a year or two older; but even if that were the case, they must be curiously simple-minded. He liked that. Their eagerness, their ardour, the importance they attached to the search, the way they ran about over the ground, and their rush each to each when either proclaimed a treasure-trove pleased him hugely. He began to feel himself quite anxious to discover something. He wondered what they would say if he did: whether they would fly at him as they did at each other: if they would despise him should he, after all, be unsuccessful.

The idea quite spurred him up; he poked and poked, and bent his tall figure, and scanned every nook, and turned over every twig and leaf, until at length, to his infinite satisfaction,

a cone of some size actually did reward his diligence.

“Look!” cried he, holding it up with lively exultation.

The result was all that could be desired; they could not look enough, could not praise enough; and he was informed at least half-a-dozen times that it was the largest found that day.

Neither evidently dreamt of taking it from him, and he began rather to repent of his discovery. “What am I to do with this?”

“Put it in your pocket, won’t you?” Jem’s own pockets were fast filling, and it seemed to him the right thing to do. Still, he looked at his cousin with a momentary suspicion, as he said, “Put it in your pocket,” aware that if Simon were of Bertie’s sort, the suggestion would not be acceptable.

For a moment Simon did falter.

In his pocket! To bulge out, press, and bump against him while he walked, and to awaken a fresh difficulty when he should take off his coat as to where further he was to bestow it? His soul revolted from the idea of tossing it, later, aside; yet he could not but feel the thing an incubus. He had meant it, when found,

to be for them. For little Hester, who looked so bright and piquant, with her hat awry over her curly brow ; he had intended to laugh away his first proposal to go shares, and put it in her hand at once ; but he saw his mistake.

Neither of the two would have taken it for the world, and to both it had afforded such evident and heartfelt delight that he, whom they had still qualms about defrauding of his property, should have himself made the most valuable discovery of the day, that there was nothing left for him to do but to insert forthwith the sticky monster in his clean coat - pocket. He did it with ineffable gravity and apparent satisfaction.

“ And,” said Hester afterwards, “ wasn’t it fortunate, Jem ? Wasn’t it delightful ? To think of his getting the largest, the finest, the most beautiful of them all, himself ! ”

She used to go and look at it on the table at Lutteridge afterwards, and note that whatever else was moved from time to time off that table—it was in a corner close to the master’s chair—the cone was always there.

Once she saw him turning it over in his hands, and told Jem.

Jem was knowing on the subject. “ Depend

upon it, Hetty, it would never have done for you or me to have found that fellow. Don't you remember how pleased he was, and what a hurry he was in to bag it, in case anything was said? He was afraid that we might expect him to offer it us, you know."

"And though we went the whole round of the woods," said she, "we never found another like it."

"Hester's walk has done her good," observed her mother, commenting on the pair of rosy cheeks and bright eyes which surmounted Miss Hester's white frock that evening. "It could not have been so very terrible after all, Hetty. I think it is a pity that you are all so much afraid of your cousin" (no one of them was more afraid than she herself)—"he seems very kind and gentle, and it will be so difficult for him ever to be at home with us if we do not meet him half-way."

"It was civil of him to come up so soon," remarked Sir John.

"Shall you ask him to shoot here, sir?" inquired Bertie.

"Of course. Let me see; when can we say? To-morrow you go there, next day Parker and Searle come here—I don't care for more than

five guns. That brings us to Sunday, does it? I suppose you know the day of the week among you," sardonically. "You all seemed so precious sure of it yesterday! Does that bring us to Sunday?"

It did; and since it was apparent that Monday or Tuesday would be the earliest date at which his nephew's civility could be returned, even Sir John was fain to allow that it was as well that he had been asked for the following evening.

"The light lasted long this afternoon," observed Lady Manners; "did any of you notice the sunset on the river? The water was very high, and the reflections were beautiful."

"We did," cried her youngest daughter. "We did, mamma. Simon and I did."

"Simon and you," laughed her father. "The mountain and the mouse! The ox and the frog! All the giants and pigmies in Christendom are a joke to 'Simon and I'!"

"It will be 'I and Simon' next!" observed Bertie.

"I thought Hester did not intend even to call him Simon," added Agatha.

"Neither I did, neither I do—to his face.

But behind his back I may say it if I like, may I not, mamma? What are they laughing at?"

"I don't know, really, Hetty. I don't know why it should have sounded odd, I am sure—but it did." Even her mother was smiling.

"And I know him better than any of you do now," added Hester, valiantly. "We went such a long, long walk, and at the end he was really very nice—was he not, Jem? I did not dislike him at all. But, mamma, think of his going with *us*! With only Jem and me! At first we thought it was going to be dreadful. Did you see the set-out? Did you see him stalking along with measured step in the middle, and Jem and me doing our best to stalk along likewise, one on each side?"

"I suppose he did not favour you with much conversation?" inquired Bertie, looking at his brother; but Jem, engrossed with a whip he was mending, made no response. "What on earth did you talk about?" pursued Mr Manners, sharply; he was not in the best of humours, although he had had his ride, and might have been presumed to have enjoyed it. He was astonished at his cousin's taste, and in the mood to cavil.

“ Oh, we talked,” said Jem, placidly. “ I don’t know. We did very well.”

“ Did you show him the stables ? ”

“ No.”

“ Nor the kennels ? ”

“ No.”

“ Jem is such a donkey,” said his brother, turning to the company, “ that he never remembers to show people anything.”

“ Why should I ? ”

“ Of course he would have liked to see them.”

“ Of course you would have liked to show them,” struck in Hetty, Jem’s defender at all times. “ Then you should have stayed yourself, Bertie, instead of riding off with those Miss Bells and their husband.”

“ I tell you what, mamma, if Hester is allowed to talk like that she will get herself into a scrape some day. ‘ Those Miss Bells and their husband ’ ! ”

“ But I never can recollect which of them it was he married. And we have known them so long as the Miss Bells, that I never can think of him but as the husband of the Miss Bells.”

“ She ought not to be allowed to say such things, mamma.”

“Hester, my dear, you must not say such things.”

“What things, mamma? Did you call him a thing?”

“Him! Whom?”

“The husband of the Miss Bells! Ho! ho! ho!”

“How can you allow it, mamma? She does not mind you a bit.”

“My dear Bertie, she is only mischievous. Hetty! Hetty!”

“Of course if you encourage her”—he was now surly and rude—“she is not likely to be anything else.”

“You ought not to speak so to me, my dear.” Lady Manners no longer smiled. “Your doing so is much worse than anything Hester said.”

“Oh, well, if that is the way——”

“Oh, shut up,” muttered Jem.

“What a noise you are making!” followed the softer plaint of his father, who had been roused from a gentle nap by his son’s loud tones. “Do not bellow into my ear like that, Bertie. Can’t you go away? So very disagreeable!” his head sinking gently down again.

Every man’s hand being thus against him,

nothing better occurred to the petulant young man than to leave the room, which he did forthwith ; and certainly the move for all was a good one.

There was seldom peace long anywhere when Bertie was present ; he was too vain, too grandiloquent, too irritable, except when in an unusually happy temper, to be safe company for any length of time. Relief, although they might not say so, invariably followed his departure from home ; and in the present instance all in their secret hearts felt that he had been at home long enough.

“I do wish Bertie would not be so quarrelsome !” cried Agatha, as the door closed. “He must always put everybody right. He was quite rude to me about my riding to-day,” added she, having a grievance not yet declared. “He talks about saying things before people, but I am sure no one else would have made me so uncomfortable—and before everybody too. Then he is by way of being so particular about Hester !”

But then they were all by way of being particular about Hester now. After having petted, pampered, and indulged their young-

est for seventeen years and a half, they had suddenly awakened to the fact that she was spoilt — the only wonder being that they had not done so long before. She was too apt to put herself forward; too ready with her opinion; too smart with a reply. She was therefore to be repressed, kept under, and taught better ways.

It was late now to begin the task, but it might nevertheless have been effected by united and consistent effort; undertaken as it was, how should it prove anything but a failure? Only by fits and starts would one of the family be roused to the necessity for action—only when smarting under some personal wound, some affront.

Then, true, the eyes of the injured would be opened, the rebuke would be administered, and a general accusation of forwardness, impertinence, and conceit be made. But as surely as this was done in public, so surely was any benefit that might have accrued to the reproof wiped away by a laugh from some one not interested, a foolish consolation to the undeserving girl, or even an attack on the attacker. No one liked to have Hester “spoken to,” except

by him or herself. She was so soon cast down, so easily crushed, that the lesson, unless an exceptional opportunity had been embraced, was sure to be followed by the caresses of some would-be friend; and thus the little maid, whose spirits were high, would forget five minutes after, that anything had been said. Of course one and all put the blame off their own shoulders. "Hester has been too much encouraged," Lady Manners would say, with a glance at her elder daughters; but when it was their turn to remark, "Hester, you are growing unbearable," the observation was not relished in high quarters.

When the mother frowned, the father would smile; when the sisters scolded, the brothers would kiss; while even if the whole circle—as sometimes though rarely happened—were against her, it needed but to see Hetty in tears to reinstate her in all the rank she had lost. She was at once the scourge, the torment, and the darling of the household.

PART II.

CHAPTER V.

“AS LITTLE OF A HERO AS IT IS POSSIBLE FOR
A MAN TO BE.”

“The man whose virtues are more felt than seen,
Must drop indeed the hope of public praise ;
But he may boast what few that win it can,
That if his country stand not by his skill,
At least his follies have not wrought her fall.”

—COWPER.

“AND what did you think of them ?” demanded Constance, immediately the servants had left the room and she was alone with her brother-in-law over their dessert that evening.

“You must have had full opportunity of learning who was who, and which was what, during such a long stay. You were the whole day at Wancote, were you not ? I declare, I ought to be affronted at your taking yourself off in this manner, Simon, on the very first morning after your return. But I suppose you were

obliged to stay, having gone before luncheon? By the way, you naughty man, I waited luncheon for you."

He was sorry, but it had not occurred to him that any one would wait.

"Oh dear, yes, to be sure I did," said she, gaily. "And very hungry I was! Ellen too. But we never thought of your giving us the slip so soon. We were amazed to find you were off to Wancote already. Shooting arrangements, I suppose?" added she, raising the wine-glass to her lips with a careless gesture, which the sharp scrutiny of her eyes belied.

The correctness of her surmise was allowed; and she would with this have been fairly well satisfied, had not something been added that was not quite so palatable. She was enjoined never to wait for him should he be absent at two o'clock. He could not engage to be in for luncheon, nor, indeed, for anything but dinner; he would let her know beforehand if he intended dining away from home. Having tasted the sweets of liberty during the last two months of his life, he boldly proclaimed his intention of securing it for the future.

This was rather strong, and not at all what she had expected.

She had reckoned on his riding with her, driving with her, and attending on her generally, unless when closeted with his steward or out among his coverts. To these she would of course yield pre-eminence; and by-and-by, should he become fairly established as a county man, other claims would naturally appear—but amidst such duties and occupations he would of necessity be safe, if not from all danger, still from the only danger she dreaded.

She only desired to know that when absent his absence could be thus comfortably accounted for.

But if he were to take to roving about, making calls at neighbours' houses during morning hours, and that without her knowing either that he was going, or even that he had been, unless it transpired casually—as in the present instance it had done—who could say what might, or rather what might not, be the consequences?

Wancote, to be sure, could hardly be looked upon as a mere neighbour's house; but then, in Wancote lay her chief anxiety.

Too wise, however, to let a glimpse of this

appear, or even leak out through overdoing her part, she played it to perfection. Above all things, she must win his confidence, and to attain this end, she was ready to be, do, seem anything for the time.

Accordingly, she linked her reproaches with smiles, and tempered her inquiries with moderation.

She mingled other interests in her talk. Even the jest with which she might have rallied a younger man was forsworn: he was to take it that he had done the natural and proper thing to do; and that the only point—the only little speck of a point—on which he had been remiss, was in not having given notice of his intentions.

If she could but get him to give notice!

Easy then would it be to arrange obstacles, suggest difficulties, or if nothing better offered, accompany him to the post of danger herself.

“It cannot last long,” she argued, referring in her own mind to the necessity for such precautions. “He will be struck ‘all of a heap,’ as Robert was; or he will escape scot-free. After a few weeks I shall begin to breathe, provided there are no indications of the malady.”

Then another idea occurred which pleased her mightily. “Robert was my slave from the first. Simon cannot be so very insensible to the same attractions which won his brother. He shall at least admire me, find me charming, and discover that my companionship is more delightful than that of any bread-and-butter Miss ! Agatha cannot compete with me in *agrémens*, and it is a mere matter of opinion which of us is the best-looking. What fun ! He will not be the first man I have won from Wancote ! And it would be a religious act to save my respected brother-in-law, because of the near relationship. I wish we were all Papists ! That would settle the matter comfortably, and let us have done with it. Even as it is, I daresay Uncle and Aunt Manners are not particularly anxious for the connection : to do them justice, they are great fools about their daughters’ marriages ; and one thing is certain, they won’t help on Simon, whatever they do. They will rather approve of my little hindrances, but I don’t imagine Agatha and Jane will be quite so well pleased. He is the very man to take their fancy.”

She was, accordingly, impatient to begin, almost chagrined to hear that the afternoon had

been spent, not in riding with Agatha and Jane, but in a walk with the younger ones.

Unable, however, to credit that so simple an arrangement had been made without premeditation, it had scarcely been told ere she had fathomed the reason to her satisfaction. All was as she had foreseen: Lady Manners had already taken fright; Sir John and she were alike in their old-world ideas, and the grown-up daughters were not to be thrown in the way of their cousin. Perhaps they had already shown signs of susceptibility, the quiet Jane might have been impressed—who knows? Those quiet people are the romantic ones.

And there was certainly something romantic about Simon. His domestic misfortunes, his melancholy, his loneliness, his wealth, — she sighed herself as she drew the picture and glanced at her brother-in-law.

To be sure, he did not look melancholy, and was sipping his wine with a serene air that spoke of a man at ease with himself and all the world; but she had determined that if she had to endure the drawbacks of his presence, she would have the sweets also. Since come he must, he should come as a hero.

The hero, she had at first predestined, should take the form of a worn-out soldier, wearily sinking into the splendours of the Lutteridge family vault.

That image dispelled, there arose the grief-stricken widower, living in the memory of by-gone happiness, round which was wrapped a halo of letters, pictures, and locks of hair.

Over this gradually supervened the admired, courted, but relentless lord of the manor, sighed after by fair ones to whom he was indifferent, devoted to solitude—and herself.

It was all very pretty if Simon would have fallen in with it.

But the time has now come when the reader must have a word about Simon himself.

He was as little of a hero as it is possible for a man to be. He was a good fellow, with more looks than wit, more heart than head. He had not as yet one idea about his sister-in-law, except that she bored him; he wished she would not talk so much, nor laugh so much; he wished particularly that she would not ask so many questions.

What could it matter to her how he had spent every hour at Wancote, and why should

she tell him all the tittle-tattle, not only of the people in the neighbourhood, but of their grandfathers and grandmothers? Her interrogations were annoying, and her information superfluous.

Never were there lips less likely to tell her so.

When Simon was pleased, he could say so; when not, he could but be silent. He was hardly ever known to speak in anger; and Heaven had gifted him with such an inscrutable countenance that he did not even display it there.

To be plain, Simon's face belied him.

We have purposely allowed the reader to receive along with the people who came to greet him at the Manor the impression that Colonel Lutteridge invariably made on strangers.

"A determined-looking fellow," Sir John thought his nephew; his wife could not bring herself to utter a commonplace in tones above a whisper; all the younger ones—his cousins, the young Westmacotts, and the Martins—experienced a creeping awe in his presence, and if he addressed them, replied with a nervous timidity they could not account for.

Constance herself, even while she called him

a “naughty man,” felt her way in making each advance as though she were treading on a quicksand.

All this was simply a delusion on the part of the good folks.

Colonel Lutteridge was not a fool, but he was almost equally little of a genius.

He was neither melancholy nor morbid, ill nor sad. He had a magnificent *physique*, and enjoyed his life heartily.

It was not his doing that this enjoyment was but seldom manifested in his countenance ; this was partly the result of a stubbornly fixed set of features—partly because, naturally reticent, he had spent the greater part of his manhood among a people who never show emotion.

He had learnt from them the trick ; and it had answered, as most things did answer with him.

It had never been necessary for him, even in his youth, to exert himself about anything. In company he had never needed to raise his voice to be heard,—the slightest word was certain to be caught up by some one—and whatever that word was, it was sure to please.

Had his lot been cast in another sphere, he had been another man.

Had it been his hap to have struggled with the crowd for a maintenance, we may safely affirm that he would not have set his foot many steps on the ladder—that he would have been jostled aside, thrust back, trodden under foot. As a clergyman, he might never have been offered a living; as a barrister, he would scarcely have possessed a brief.

But as the lord of Lutteridge Manor, Simon did excellently well. He went to India because he liked it, and stayed there for the same reason—the rich, imaginative oriental mind pleased him, even while his own could not cope with it; and had his wife lived, and had children been born to him, it is probable that he might not have left the country of his adoption until, at least, he was no longer fit for foreign service.

But as he had been so speedily released from all domestic ties, he had had nothing but his military career to fall back upon, and gradually it had closed in upon him, and become the absorbing interest of his life.

His promotion was rapid, as promotion is in an Indian regiment; and when the amiable young subaltern became in due course major, and then colonel, he found himself the most

popular commanding officer that had been known for many years.

But why? Because he had grown up in it, and his comrades knew Simon. His majestic mien could not impose on them, nor could the frown with which he was wont to receive a petition take in the weakest. Everybody got everything they wanted: it was taken for granted that a request would be acceded to ere it was made; plans were laid with no reference whatsoever to authority; and, in short, the regiment grew disorderly and unmanageable.

It was at this time that—whether in obedience to a hint from high quarters, or whether from an inward consciousness that such would not long be withheld if he remained at a post for which he began to feel himself unfit, we need not inquire—Colonel Lutteridge threw up his command without giving his subordinates time or opportunity to remonstrate.

While Constance was filling her imagination by turns with images of the invalid and the inconsolable, her brother-in-law was in reality to be pitied for a simpler sorrow. His military reputation was indifferent; he was not retiring full of years and honours, nor—happier still—of

honours without the years; he was seeking to hide among the shades of Lutteridge regrets and mortification.

He was not a man to whine about it, even to himself, and his departure took place with due decorum, and—as may well be imagined—much heartfelt regret expressed on all sides by those left behind.

Their colonel's stoical face did not deceive *them*.

“The old boy feels it,” they said, one to another; and the knowing ones pursed up their lips, and wagged their heads, aware that the good time had now gone, and that it was—contrary to all regulation—the bad time that was coming.

For the major, who was now promoted to reign over the unpromising crew, was in every way the reverse of honest Lutteridge. A little ferrety man, with no blood and no means, yet with brains enough to bother them all. It was he indeed who had, in the primary instance, bothered the poor colonel away—of that they had evidence, and accordingly they owed him a grudge on that score, to begin with; and then, when no one had dreamed of his succeeding,

and Talfourd had made sure of stepping over his head—and Talfourd would have been another of Lutteridge's own sort—the little wretch who had set the whole thing agoing came forward with the money, which he had scraped together somehow—begged, borrowed, or stolen—and laughed in their faces.

Grief and lamentation followed Simon, and the glories of his dynasty were long remembered in the place that knew him no more.

Not a whisper of this, however, reached Lutteridge.

To all there the tall man, with his straight figure and stately bearing, was, as we have seen, one to impose reverence. His square brow betokened talent, his curved chin resolution.

All the men agreed that he must have an iron will and an infernal temper, which the women more gently construed into a high spirit and that decision which every character ought to possess.

Out of this material Mrs Robert Lutteridge had now to construct her puppet. We left her inspecting him over her wine-glass, with a little startled look upon her face, as if she was not so absolutely sure as she had been at first of the sort of man she had to deal with.

He was not munching dry biscuit and sighing over a glass of pale sherry, as he ought to have been ; he had filled his plate with a rich cluster of raisins with their accompanying milk-white almonds, and was eating as if he liked them. Absently eating, it is true, with his arms on the table and his eyes fixed on a corner of the room, but still with a look that denoted nothing more — if the truth must be told — than calculation.

She was right. He could not, when taxed, affirm that his fancy had taken flight beyond the consideration of how many couples of dogs would be wanted for the following day, and whether it would not perhaps have been as well to have permitted his cousins to bring one or more from the Wancote kennels, as they had proposed doing.

At the time he had declined the offer, but on going to inspect his own afterwards, he had found that a retriever on which he had reckoned would not be forthcoming. The novel interest had awakened him to more lively animation than he had yet shown, and he was quite eager in explaining to her the difficulty. His old regiment, and his grievance connected with it, were

so far removed from this quiet place as to be almost invisible ; and being now surrounded by new, and, above all, unconscious faces—faces who had heard nothing of his trouble and vexation—he began to brighten under the genial influence. Even the journey down to Bombay, and the voyage home, had not, as we shall show presently, been without their effects ; and although he had been, so far, still sore enough about his enforced return as to put down peremptorily all ideas as to a reception on his estate, he had been in the humour to be gratified with the quiet and unobtrusive welcome vouchsafed to him.

He was very well pleased to find that he should have, in Sir John Manners, a relation so close at hand, and so well qualified to advise him on points as to which there would be no disgrace in seeking advice. In the ladies of the party he had merely recognised a different order of beings from those he had been accustomed to meet ; he had not done more—their nearer acquaintance he could wait for. But he was delighted to find the sons at home. Their reputation was joined to their father’s as the crack shots of the county, and it had reached his ears, even before he arrived at the Manor. He had

heard of them in London, and the prospect of shooting in their company had roused him more than anything else to interest in Lutteridge.

It was no wonder that, instead of hanging with drooping eyelids over the table, he should be enjoying with his almonds and raisins the animating consideration concerning the retriever, and that when questioned he should cheerfully avow it.

“Let me write,” cried Constance. “Let me see, James can go over and bring their answer. Do not *you* take the trouble, Simon, but just tell me what I am to say, and I will write directly.”

“You write!” said he, surprised. “By no means; a message will do.”

And he rose to ring the bell.

“But I had something to say, at all events,” protested his sister-in-law. “One note will do for all, if you will tell me the names of the dogs you want.”

“I don’t know his name. It was a large black retriever we had with us to-day. Since you are going to write at any rate, perhaps you will kindly mention it.”

“The large black retriever who went with you to-day. I know him; he is a splendid fellow.

What *is* his name? I know it perfectly, only it has gone out of my head at this instant. Don't you love retrievers? There is something so grand about them, and they have such noble, thoughtful faces. Little dogs are my aversion, silly little spoilt things. They have such an absurd pug at Wancote; did you see it? Of course; it is always in the drawing-room, but none of the others are allowed into the house. Now I would sooner, if I had any, have some of the larger ones, some of those beautiful retrievers; would not you?"

"They generally do their work," he said.

"Do they? But of course I don't know anything about that, I was looking upon them in another light. I like to make friends of horses and dogs" (no one liked it less, but she wished to discover his sentiments on the subject). "How any one can shoot an animal that has grown attached to them, and followed them about all its life, I can't think."

"What can you do? They must be shot when they are old."

"Oh, Simon! I did not expect that from you. How would you like to be shot when you are old? Oh, I could never, never kill any crea-

ture that I had once been fond of ; the bare idea is horrible !”

As it was improbable that she would ever be called upon to do so, this called for no reply, and the lady paused for breath.

She was uncertain how to go on.

She awaited an argument, a deprecation, or at least a laugh ; but as none of them were forthcoming, she rose from the table and went off to write her note.

When finished, she took it back with her to the dining-room. A thousand pardons, but she was obliged to intrude on him for one single moment, just to see if what she had said was correct. Aware that it was at least elegantly expressed, and that her handwriting was pretty, he was begged to peruse the sheet for himself.

He could not help thinking how much less trouble the message would have been.

“ Will it not do ? ” inquired Constance, misinterpreting the gravity of his “ Thank you.”

She turned it over in her mind that evening, and was unable to arrive at anything she could have said amiss. He had taken no notice of her note beyond merely allowing, when pressed, that it would “ do ; ” therefore, she argued, there

must have been a flaw somewhere, which his quick eye had detected. Long after the messenger had returned, and all had been satisfactorily understood, she was still by fits and starts meditating on the subject.

We need scarcely say how groundless was her chagrin. The interruption, nothing more, accounted for the momentary shade of annoyance on Simon's brow ; and well accustomed to the style of his sister-in-law's correspondence, as well as to the size of her capitals, the fresh specimen called for no comment. How should he know that she wanted to show, more than all besides, more even than her graceful penmanship, her affection for the “Dearest Agatha” to whom the note was written ?

Left at length to himself, Simon breathed a sigh of relief.

It was not that he objected to conversation, even to such lively chatter as Constance's, if she would have been content to prattle herself, and would not have compelled him to bear a part, whether he would or no.

She plied him too continuously, and he felt that if he committed himself to one rejoinder, it did but open the way for a dozen more attacks.

This to a man just awakened out of a long slumbrous lethargy, and scarcely yet sure of the ground whereon he stood, was bewildering.

All his thoughts were now so novel and so strange, that, since he was not a person accustomed to dwelling deeply on subjects, he found difficulty in mastering them. He could scarcely realise the life upon whose threshold he stood. It seemed easy—it seemed pleasant; he hoped he should be found equal to it—do better in it than in that which he had left behind. He liked all he had seen; he would not even recognise the presence of his brother's widow and her child as a disturbing influence. No; he argued, if there was some ill, some trifling inconvenience attached to their residence, there was much counterbalancing good.

Alone, he would assuredly have been dull. The little one especially was an addition; he had sent for her in the dusk, and had amused her for nearly an hour before dinner: and further, he could not but perceive that order and discipline were maintained within and without the place to an extent that it was but too probable he, single-handed, would have been unable

to enforce. To Constance this must be due, and he was the last person to underrate his obligations to her.

She had, indeed, got the Manor up to a pitch of perfection before his approach which was creditable to all concerned. Never had it looked more beautiful, more luxuriant,—since her “What would your master say to this?” or, “Don’t let your master have to speak about that,” had not once failed in their effect.

She was quite sure that nothing escaped Simon—convinced that he was passing his own observations, drinking in all that went on. And the less of his opinions she was able to gather, the more value she set upon them.

“But I must not throw myself too much in his way,” she shrewdly discovered. “I have told him where I am to be found when he wants me; and nothing plagues a man more than being followed about. If he seeks me out, I will make it pleasant for him to the very best of my power—I will encourage him to come again, and again, and again; but I will never go after him. No, indeed, monsieur, I know better! Well, I daresay we shall get on

capitally by-and-by ; but at present——” She sighed ; and the same reflection in substance passing through his mind at the same moment, he sighed also.

At present they hardly knew how to suit each other.

CHAPTER VI.

TWILIGHT IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

“’Twixt the gloamin’ and the mirk, when the kye come hame.”

—HOGG.

VERY particular, and somewhat tiresome to boot, was Bertie Manners as to all arrangements for his first shooting-day with his cousin.

At Lutteridge he and Jem often shot—Constance herself bringing out their lunch in her pony-carriage, and carrying back as much of the spoil as had fallen to the guns ere she came. But shooting over the manor in that free-and-easy way—letting off birds by way of not killing down the game, and taking pot-shots on the sly, since there was no one by to see—was a different thing to going out in state with the proprietor, and feeling conscious that every manœuvre would be under the eye of a practised sportsman. He, as well as they, had been

heard of by repute ; and it behoved the lads, for the credit of their name, not to be outdone.

Much sensible advice was therefore lavished on Jem, little by-counsels about hen-birds and the like, which, though delivered by the elder brother, were, in truth, only needed by him. Jem would have scorned to have shot down a single hen-pheasant more during his cousin's absence than in his presence.

Bertie's toilet was, moreover, elaborate ; and as he descended to the breakfast-table in all points accoutred, he was perhaps, in his secret heart, not displeased to note his brother's inferiority.

He must affect, however, to be so. "Have you nothing but that to put on?" he remarked, stopping short in his walk up the room.

The "that" referred to was a short, tight, ragged jacket, tinged with drops from the mouth of many a hare, and dear to the owner as a part of himself.

"Nothing but what?" said he. He did not even look up, but continued eating.

"Well!" rejoined his brother. "Well!" added he, after a pause, during which he had walked up to Jem, walked round him, and

surveyed him from head to foot. Then he turned to the others, "Ought he to be allowed to go out like this?"

"Why not?" said Jem, finding all eyes upon him. "Why on earth not?" added he, getting flustered.

When it was explained to him—"My jacket?" cried he. "What is the matter with my jacket? I have no other. I go out in this every day."

"But perhaps, as you are going to Lutteridge," suggested his mother, pleasantly, "I think, dear Jem, you might make some change. You are not to be alone, you know. I should not quite like your cousin to see you dressed so."

"But it's my shooting-jacket," expostulated her son. "I could not shoot in any other jacket. I always go out in this. You see me in it every day."

"Simon does not see you in it every day."

"He will, though—at least whenever I shoot with him."

"You might change for this once, my dear."

"Change to what, mamma? I have nothing to change to. I have never had any other. I would not have another for the world. I have shot in this ever since I've had a gun."

“So I should imagine,” said Bertie, drily.

“Imagine! Why?”

“It is no wonder that you have grown out of it!”

“What does it matter if I have grown out of it? The arms are all right. I hate things that get in the way.”

“Your pocket is torn.”

“What does it matter if it is torn? It can be mended to-morrow. It will hold my things right enough for to-day.”

Very few things “mattered” in Jem’s opinion. It mattered if the sport was bad, or if Bertie cheated him, as I am sorry to say he sometimes did, as to the dogs he got; but if he were fairly used, and let alone, and provided he could kill his birds—for that, after all, was the great thing—it mattered not to him whether the day were good or bad, whether he were wet or dry, in company or alone. He could not understand a fuss about clothes. What were clothes? When his torn pocket was spoken of, he looked down at the place and patted it. So long as it held his cutty-pipe, his tobacco, and his match-box, it was immaterial to him whether it had a piece hanging down by the side or not.

“I suppose the maids can mend it,” he repeated. “It will do for to-day.”

He was as much in awe of his cousin as were any of them, but he felt sure Simon would not judge him by such appearances. “He is not the man to care for that sort of thing,” said Jem, simply.

“How can you tell that?” said his brother. “He is just the fellow to surprise us all some of these days. But, however, have your own way; luckily, no one else is to be there.”

Breakfast concluded, the two hurried off. They were anxious not to be late, not to keep their host waiting; and Bertie, who was usually, nay, as invariably behindhand as was his brother, was now the one to inquire the time most frequently as they ran up through the woods from the boat-house.

It was too much trouble of course to take out his own watch, but he could refer to Jem; and by Jem it was only two minutes after the appointed hour when they reached the kennels.

Simon was there before them, but not as they had pictured him, coolly superintending operations. He looked hurried and worried, yet gave the boys a more hearty, an infinitely less cere-

monious, greeting than they had yet received from him.

“Awfully glad you have brought that dog. We are two short, as it turns out. Can’t think how it has happened.” He was evidently accustomed to having difficulties smoothed before him when he went on the war-path; to having obstacles thought of and put out of the way; every evil contingency guarded against, and emergency prepared for.

The stolid face of the head-keeper, as he repeated without variation the statement which he had first made, and which he considered unanswerable, was irritating to a man who was used to having his own way; and it said something for our soldier that he merely showed, and did not give vent to, his annoyance.

Even after this was explained, they did not start.

There was a hitch—the plain truth being, that Colonel Lutteridge was obliged to be told where he was to go. He had already been coached up on the subject, but he had got confused, was nervous, and had forgotten. The keepers were pretending to help, delivering audible asides, contradicting each other, but at the same time uniting in exposing their master’s ignorance,

and letting the young gentlemen see how he was reduced to entire reliance on them.

The situation would have grown to be awkward had it not been for the straightforward Jem Manners, who, directly he understood what was going forward, turned to his cousin and said right out, "I say, we had better show you when to begin, hadn't we?"

Bertie might frown, but it was plain that the knot was thus cut; and the proposal being gladly accepted, it was soon obvious to Constance, by the joyous clamour set up among the dogs who were starting, and by the disappointed yelps and whines of those left behind, that the coast was clear. The sport was excellent, the birds lying close, and making short flights. The day, too, was dry and fine, with scarce a breath stirring, so that the party stayed out late, and did not arrive at Wancote till the light was nearly gone. On such field-days Sir John consented to dine an hour later. It was but for a short time in the year, and there were not many days, even in September and October, when the request was made.

Only Hester was in the large firelit drawing-room when Bertie ushered in his guest, and

Hester's trepidation was awakened anew when she found that she was thus, for the second time, singled out to be alone with the formidable visitor; for no sooner had her brother opened the door, than, muttering something about finding out what room Colonel Lutteridge was to have, he immediately disappeared, to seek the glass of beer which a long day in the woods made imperative.

It had already been offered to his cousin, but had been declined with a curtness which made him fancy it despised.

It was not; Simon was merely hoping that his avowal of not drinking beer would not be construed into the possession of a liver complaint. He was thinking of this as he entered the drawing-room, unwillingly, afraid of a circle, and disinclined for feminine questions and cross-questions.

He was very well satisfied as to his day; but even the knowledge that he had both shot well and walked well, was not sufficient stimulus to provoke him to say so. He hated to speak while others listened; it was said of him that with but one auditor no one knew better what to say.

“No one here but you!” he began, in the tone which the walk of the day before entitled him to. “When I first came in, I fancied the room was full of people. I saw all sorts of shadowy figures in the twilight.”

The discovery that the figures had been phantoms of the imagination produced a sudden alertness in the step which had before been reluctant, and he came up to the only lady present, looking very handsome and pleasant indeed.

“I am afraid every one is gone to dress,” said she. “I—I think you are late. But some one said—Agatha said—dinner is to be late. We were to wait for you.”

“That was very kind. We certainly are late.”

“Will you have some tea?” inquired the little maiden, supposing that she ought to ask, but hoping devoutly that he would say “No.”

She knew it was cold and weak, a watered pot, abomination of abominations; and he was sure to like it strong.

But how tiresome of the boys to come in just when her sisters had not been gone up-stairs above five minutes! five minutes sooner, and she would

have been let alone, left to the bliss of finishing her book, her delightful all-absorbing book, in peace. She was so comfortable—did so hate the interruption. For any cause it would have been distasteful to have to put down ‘The Children of the New Forest,’ just at the moment when Edward and Patience were having their final interview before the separation ; but to have to quit the company of such a pair of lovers for that of an ordinary everyday visitor—or at least one who was likely to become so—was trying in the extreme. She was a little shy, and a little out of humour, but naturally the latter mood did not appear : still her “Will you have some tea?” spoken by instinct, was not, perhaps, all that it ought to have been in politeness.

“Let me help myself,” replied her cousin, sitting down by her side at the little table in the corner of the room, on the long settee which ran round it. She had been curled up beneath the corner window to catch the last glimmer of light, and accordingly here she was now caught and hedged in. “What are you reading?”

“The most delightful book there ever was,” said Hester, with a smile, which was for the book, not for him. “Are you looking for a cup?

I saw some—somewhere——” Even yet she was hardly awake; her mind hardly followed her words.

“Don’t let me disturb you,” said he, kindly. “I know what it is. I used to be desperately fond of a story-book. You go on with what you are doing, and I will look after myself.”

But this was too much : she was alive at last to the discourtesy of her demeanour, when she perceived him endeavouring to pour tea from a teapot from which every drop had been drained.

“Oh, I am so sorry. The kettle, please,” cried she. She had been spoken to about her tea-making only that afternoon. Every one had complained of inattention to their likings and dislikings; and albeit just promoted to the office, there had been a threat of taking it from her. How she wished it had been, if not for ever, at least for that afternoon. The kettle was her last hope: it looked so large and trustworthy that she thought the water in it must still be hot, even though the lamp had been put out; but all conjectures on that head were soon at an end, since it became evident, by the way it rose when grasped by her cousin’s hand, that the kettle too was empty.

"It was papa," said Hester. "He never—that is, hardly ever takes tea in the afternoon, but to-day he had a great breakfast-cup—look, there it is! He called for all I had left; and I did not think that any of you would be home in time. But please let me pass; I will ring, and we shall have more in a minute."

"Thanks. I'd rather not."

She sat down again hastily, uncertain what to do.

"I frightened you?" said Simon.

"Oh no. But I am sure I ought to ring. Mamma would be so vexed, and it was my fault."

"Not at all. We had no right to expect any at this hour; and if I had not been thirsty I should not have wanted it. Have you any milk?"

"There is cream."

She poured it out, cool and bubbling, into the cup, relieved to have the difficulty over, and with evident satisfaction inquired if he liked it. Was it good?

Very good, he said; he had not tasted anything so good for a long time.

"I am so glad."

Bertie, entering by the dining-room door, caught the last sentences. "Oh, tea," he said. "None for me, thank you, Hester; I have had beer. Is it really fit to drink, what you have there? If it is, it must be something uncommon."

The smile of one, and the blush of the other, were alike lost on him: he passed on to the fireplace, where his eye had caught his name outside some letters, and with these he was soon engrossed. It seemed long to him ere he looked round again, but he was conscious that the voices had not ceased in the interval. "You shall come, I promise," his cousin was saying, when at length he returned to the outer world.

"What is Hester making you promise?" inquired her brother.

"I did not make him," said Hester, hastily. "I only said I would like it."

"It? What?" pursued Bertie, with an air that said, "Whatever 'it' may be, it can have nothing to do with *me*; I am not responsible for the nonsense of such a child."

No time, however, was given for explanations: the words had scarcely passed his lips ere the door at the far end of the room opened, and

down came Agatha in her evening dress, flowers in her hair and bosom, and a roll of music in her hand.

“Agatha! What is the meaning of this? What are you down at this unearthly hour for?” demanded Bertie, as Agatha, looking charming, came forward to shake hands with her cousin. “Do you know what o’clock it is?” continued he.

“I had a song to practise, and the library is a difficult room to sing in; so I like to come here, when there is no one to be disturbed by me. How late you all are! I heard you come in long ago! Hester, how are you still here?” added Miss Manners, rather coldly.

“The second gong has not sounded, Agatha.”

“There it is, now. You had better be quick.”

“So I shall—when I go; but I don’t want to go yet. It is much pleasanter here. Why should people always be hurried away to dress when they don’t want to go?” said Hester, plaintively.

“You will be late,” replied her sister, turning away. She could not understand Simon’s sitting down again, after he had risen to greet her; she thought he ought at once, on her giving so

broad a hint, to have apologised for his negligence, and made off.

Instead of this he resumed his seat by her sister ; and Hetty, now emboldened by numbers, began to show herself in her true colours—as perverse a little witch as any to be found out of fairyland.

Afterwards she alleged that she could not have passed, without forcing her cousin to stand aside ; he had fairly put her into the corner, and it would have been rude to ask him to rise.

“But what were you doing to get wedged into that corner?” demanded Agatha.

She was very cross with Hester, and took her to task roundly, when it was found that the three who had despised her exhortations, actually did in the end prove defaulters.

“Hester would not stir, though I told her,” she announced to the rest of the party, assembled and waiting ; “I knew how it would be.”

Simon was at the drawing-room door, when he heard a light sound, and saw a thing like a bird skim down the staircase and fly towards him. “Do you want to come in under my wing?” he said ; “it is a pity Bertie is not here too.” But they agreed that it would not do to

wait, and entered together, with apologies which did not go any way towards soothing the feelings of the one most aggrieved. As soon as she could, she took her sister to task, as we have said.

“Perfect nonsense, Hester. You could have gone, had you chosen. What did it signify whether the others went or not? It was not for you to keep them.”

“I did not keep them. How could *I* keep anybody?” It was Hester’s whim occasionally to be over modest, and her tone was now meant to express, “Such a thing as I!”

“You should have gone, and they would have followed. It was for you to make the move. Nothing kept you but idleness; you would finish your wretched novel——”

—— “My novel? I had not read a word for half an hour!”

“What were you doing then?”

“Talking.”

“You kept them all. As you sat still, Simon thought he must. I daresay he did not care to stay at all, but you sat on and on,—I thought you would never go.”

The truth was, Agatha had found the party unmanageable. Bertie, on purpose to show that

he was not to be ordered by an elder sister, had taken out his letters again, and re-read them, before her face. Hester had set herself to argue the point, enjoying a tilt in which her ready tongue enabled her invariably to come off the victor. And Simon, on his part, had chosen to be amused by the skirmishing : he was passively on the side of the majority, diverted by the smart repartees of the sisters, and not aware, as Bertie and Hester were, what the red spot on the cheek of his eldest cousin meant.

All this incensed the correct and decorous Agatha.

“I cannot think how you could have behaved so,” she now cried, having had much ado to keep her temper under, and carry on the jesting in presence of the others. “I am sure mamma would not have liked it at all. Although he is a relation, you should remember that as yet he knows nothing whatever about us, and he may fancy all sorts of absurd things from what you said to-day.”

“Because we laughed at you !”

“It was only you who laughed,—you should not say ‘we.’ I thought it very ridiculous, and unkind too.”

“ You looked so solemn, who could have helped it? You ought to have joined in the joke.”

“ Joke ! There was no joke,” angrily. “ You were giggling at nothing.”

“ We were giggling at you.”

“ You ought to be ashamed to say so if you were. Such a thing to do ! No well-bred person would ever think of doing such a thing.”

“ Agatha, how can you be such a goose ? ”

“ You know if I were to tell mamma that nothing would vex her more. How was Simon to know that you were only teasing when you looked quite grave, doing all you could to put me in an absurd light ? ”

“ You did still more yourself.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ You went preaching on, with a red face, and as solemn as a judge, when you saw that we were all laughing. You have no idea what a figure you cut.”

“ Hester, you are perfectly vulgar ! ”

“ What is all this about ? ” cried Hester, at last. “ What has brought about this rhodomontade ? I was late for dinner—so were we all, by the way ; Bertie was not down till after we

had gone in, though I alone am to bear the brunt : well, have I never been late for dinner in my life before ? Surely if mamma lets me off, you need not follow me about to say disagreeable things ! ”

“ You know very well that was not what we were speaking of just now ; it was the way you behaved in the drawing-room that was the worst. ”

“ You made the other a peg to hang your lecture upon. Well, I have had enough on either head. ”

“ You don’t want me to speak to mamma ? ”

This told.

“ If you will promise not to do it again, ” continued Agatha, “ I will not say anything, but really it is not nice. Before Simon, too, of all people. Why, yesterday you pretended to be quite afraid of him ! ”

“ Pretended ! I was. ”

“ I am sure you were not to-day. ”

“ Well, no, ” said Hester, thoughtfully, “ I don’t know that I am now. I begin to think that I rather like him. Even when I *am* afraid of him I don’t want him away. You see we had quite a long bit of walk alone together yesterday—for Jem

had to take the dogs along the road, and we went through the woods—and he was so nice, he told me so many things. I think I could get on with him very well if all of you were away.”

“Absurd!” exclaimed her sister, the “all of you” grating on her ear; she would even have preferred a personal accusation to being thrown into such a contemptuous “all of you;” “he is not an ogre to eat you up!” she added, grandly. “The truth is, there has been such a fuss made about his being silent, that you exaggerated it until you imagined he would not say a word like other people!”

“Neither he does, when other people are by. You need to be just you and him together.”

“You don’t expect him to talk to a child like you when he has any one else to talk to!”

“You don’t understand,” muttered Hester, hopelessly.

“You fancy that he is easy only with you,” said Agatha, whose turn it now was for scorn, “whereas he is the same with every one of us. He was quite talkative to me when we were by the piano in the evening, and I daresay he was the same to Jane. You think too much of yourself, Hester.”

In another part of the house an admonition something similar was also being given.

The two sons were smoking in the gun-room before bed-time.

"I should take care what I said to Simon if I were you," observed Bertie. "It was rather cool your telling him we had better show the way on his own ground."

"How could he know?"

"He had his own men to tell him; it was no business of ours. Oh, of course there was no harm in it, only it might have looked as if we were taking the lead—some fellows would not have liked it. I don't know that he minded, but he might have taken you up precious short."

"We should never have got off if I had not."

"Oh, I know. I was glad you did. I only meant for another time. I was uncommonly glad you had said it, since it did no harm; and I say, what an ass that Butte did make of himself! As if we don't know a long way better than he does where the birds are! But what I meant was, take care not to go too far—don't do it again. Now that he has been out once, he will think he knows all about it."

"He won't, though."

“Let him find that out for himself.”

“I think he is a nice fellow,” said Jem.

“Give me a light, will you? Oh, nice enough, I daresay; but he is awfully hard to get on with. I hate a fellow who won’t open his mouth.”

“He is going to have an otter pack here next week.”

“Good luck! You don’t say so!”

“I think it will be Wednesday.”

“Wednesday? That will do very well. We have nothing on for Wednesday. Did he ask us?”

“Ask us! Of course. He spoke as if we were coming at least,—or I did. It is all one.”

“That’s what I tell you,” said Bertie, laying down his pipe. “That’s just the sort of thing you do. Why could you not have kept quiet, and let him say it?”

“He did say it; we both said it. Of course he never thought of anything else.”

“It would have been so easy just to have held your tongue!”

“Oh, shut up,”—the only expression of annoyance Jem knew. “I tell you it was all right,” he added, sulkily.

“Just the sort of stupid thing——”

“No stupid thing at all. He was as pleased as he could be. I showed him where we found the old one, and told him about the hunts last year. He was as interested as possible. As if we needed to be asked to go, when any one can go!”

“Go with the tag-rag and bobtail, of course.”

“Well, I’d far rather go with the tag-rag and bobtail. If you don’t think we had invitation enough, let us join in at the start, and papa and the girls can go to the house.”

This he knew would, in his own parlance, draw his brother.

Bertie wondered what good that was to do—whether it was more fit for his father and sisters to go to a house unasked than for them; finally told his brother frankly that he was a young cub, and ought to go to school to mend his manners.

CHAPTER VII.

SIMON GOES HIS OWN WAY.

“ Forgive him, then, thou bustler in concerns
 Of little worth ; an idler in the best.
 If author of no mischief, and some good,
 He seeks his proper happiness by means
 That may advance, and cannot hinder thine.
 Nor though he tread the secret path of life,
 Engage no notice, and enjoy much ease,
 Account him an encumbrance to the state.”

—COWPER.

ALTHOUGH Colonel Lutteridge had neither the talents nor the temper which common opinion credited him with, he was not by any means wanting in strength of character, and was to the full as self-reliant as even the world accounted him to be.

He had no love of power, but he would still less have liked himself to be under authority : he could not awe his subordinates out of pursuing their own courses, but none ever presumed to interfere with his. If he permitted each to

go his own way, he at least allowed none to cross their colonel's path. He exacted for himself the liberty he granted others.

What he chose to do, he did; where he pleased to go, he went. He was neither in the habit of asking advice nor sympathy; and as he had scarcely ever in his life been required to give an account of himself, it was unlikely that he should begin to do so in the thirty-ninth year of his age, and to a person who had no claim to expect so much.

Accordingly, Constance found herself unaccountably baffled in the plan she had laid down for ruling her brother-in-law with a charmed rod.

She used to flutter out of the porch when he was seen coming up the avenue, bring him his letters, and entreat that they might be read by her boudoir fire. She would set Ellen to watch for his return, till the poor child was sick of her unrewarded task; what pleasure was it to her to detect her uncle's figure among the laurels, when it was but the signal for her being hustled out of the way herself before he came in?

True, she was allowed to appear for half an hour before dinner, and even to sit up to it

occasionally, at Simon's intercession; but Constance permitted no one to be present during the cosy twilight hour, which was her chief opportunity of ingratiating herself with her brother-in-law. At no other time in the day could she catch him, and as time advanced he was not often in at this.

He began to understand the manœuvre, and quietly, as was his wont, undid it; he came in late, and went straight to his dressing-room.

He now began to have engagements, duties of one sort or another; and it was only by her being told that a horse or a carriage had been ordered at such and such a time, or to meet such and such a train, that she would be informed that he had gone off for the day.

Of course it was all as it should be; when, on his first arrival, she had felt herself compelled to suggest—as faintly as possible, but still she had spoken the words—that she and her children should seek an asylum elsewhere, he had replied by an earnest protestation that, at any rate for the present, no change should be made.

She was, as both knew—with the exception of a paltry two hundred a-year, which barely

sufficed to dress herself and Ellen—dependent on Simon. He had been sent for to his brother's deathbed, when he had voluntarily taken upon himself to be her support; and looking on her son as his heir-presumptive, he had undertaken his expenses entirely.

He was not prepared, at any rate until he had thought the matter over, to make new arrangements. He had settled in his mind the question of a separate establishment, and found it easier, so long as Constance remained inoffensive, and there were no disturbing element introduced into the household, to continue things as they were.

He could not even bind himself to live regularly at Lutteridge, since he was uncertain what kind of life it might prove to be; and were he, after turning away the widow and her children, to discover that it was uncongenial to him, he would be shown to have done a foolish thing.

But in giving her his renewed assurance that she might still look on the Manor as her home, he had added a word which should have been regarded as a command, had she had the sense to see it so. His gentle, "We shall both go our own way," should have been interpreted

into, "I shall not meddle with you, but you had best not meddle with me."

Since he found, however, that she did not take the hint, as any one better acquainted with the speaker would have done; that she was perpetually fidgeting round him with interrogations, and finding out about him from the servants,—he simply said less, and acted more independently than ever.

He was not to be coerced.

She did her best, was always cheerful,—since men, she knew, liked cheerful people—invariably prettily dressed to catch his eye, kind and thoughtful to engage his gratitude.

Any little service which he asked her to perform was rendered with effusion, and he heard of it a dozen times before it was done with.

Any subject likely to interest him was dwelt on, and he was felled with his own schemes.

Outwardly they got on very well, but she had no real influence; and as to her exercising the surveillance she had at one time anticipated, it proved to be the veriest mirage.

When Wancote was the theme, Constance shone. All the girls were praised, Agatha more

than any. Agatha was *the* one, the flower of the flock, the Miss Manners *par excellence*—did he not think so? Did he not agree with her? Stupid man, then; he must have no eyes.

All the time she thought him wondrous sly.

She did not think him in love,—he was not interested enough, not impatient enough, not often enough at the house for that; but she suspected him of a little dissimulation, and dissimulation on such a point meant something.

He mentioned that he had been at Wancote, if asked, and he did so unconcernedly; but she got little else out of him.

She never knew, for instance, that he had learned his way to the sisters' morning room, and had spent one whole wet afternoon there.

His uncle and aunt had left that morning for a short stay away from home, and the young people had had a merry time of it. Agatha had played waltzes, and Jane had boiled the kettle, and Jem had burned his face over the toast—and they had all frolicked together, even Bertie condescending to join in the fun.

Bertie thought it rather fine on the whole, since his cousin was there, and since that sort of thing has been the fashion of late; and he

went round with the scones, and ate Jem's toast, quite good-naturedly for so great a man.

Hester sat on the rug with Jem, helping him, and scorching her own chubby cheeks; but even Agatha could not chide Hester's mirth when she was so gay herself.

The otter-hunt, which had been put off for a week, was again fixed on, and all were engaged to come, and were invited by their cousin to dine at the Manor the night before. "We shall have a lot of people in the house," he said, "and Constance will send Agatha a note to-night." He had learnt to call them by their names by this time; and since all was to be done with such propriety, Agatha was graciously pleased to signify that they would go.

Only a few of the more ardent feminine spirits were disappointed to hear during the dinner that unfortunately the hunt for the next morning had been arranged to take place where carriages could not follow.

Captain Cotterill was exceedingly sorry—he had misunderstood; but on the following day, on Thursday, if any of the ladies would honour him with their presence, he would be at their service; and Mrs Robert Lutteridge

would chaperon all who stood in need of a duenna. He was extremely sorry, he hoped no one was disappointed; and on Thursday they would have a regular show-day.

A suggestion was now, however, made by the host. He understood that there were excellent walkers among the ladies present: since carriages could not follow, what was to prevent their doing Captain Cotterill the honour of going on foot?

In all probability they would enjoy much more of the sport; and the weather was all that could be desired.

Constance was appealed to, and she made no objection—she was not the one to make an objection to any scheme; and in the present case if a party could be made up, she professed herself ready to join it.

“Speak to them, then,” said her brother-in-law, aside. “Get them to go if you can.”

Constance nodded. “Certainly, I will speak to Agatha, as soon as her song is finished.” In a few minutes she went obediently to the piano; but Agatha attested afterwards that, so far from her understanding from Constance that their presence was really desired, an agreement,

at Constance's instance, had been entered into by both, to resist all entreaties.

Constance, she allowed, had at first certainly inquired if Agatha wished to go.

If Agatha did wish it, was really anxious about it, Constance would see what could be done ; but for her own part she did not altogether approve of the expedition. She did not know where the hunt might go ; it would be a scramble, the ground was very wet, and she did not think they would enjoy themselves.

Agatha drew back, of course.

To tell the truth, such expeditions were never much to Agatha's taste : she liked a steady, straightforward walk, drive, or ride ; she liked an evening of music and pictures. A drawing-room where there were no corners, where the people grouped around a centre ottoman and sofas, and where no one had a chance of saying a word unobserved, was what she approved of. She had an indefinable dislike to nondescript forms of entertainment, at which, in spite of her youth, she was out of her element.

There was no buoyancy, no mischief, in Agatha, and she could not endure the latter quality in others.

She was only too glad to be let off "a mad escapade," as she truthfully assured Constance. The two heads were some time over their confabulation, and, in the meantime, another was going on at the other end of the room. Colonel Lutteridge was leaning over the sofa on which sat his youngest cousin.

"You see I have not forgotten my promise, Hester."

"Oh no, you have done all you could. I am so sorry."

"Sorry? Why? Do you not want to come after all?"

"Indeed I do. But I am afraid I shall not be allowed. I don't think Agatha cares about it herself."

"Well, but if Agatha does not care, why should that keep you and Jane? Constance will take care of you."

"If Agatha will let us go?"

He began to perceive.

"Is Agatha left in charge?" he said.

"Oh yes. Oh, I do want to go so very much; I do think Agatha might allow us just for once. It is the walking after the hounds that I should like; I should not care nearly

so much about going if I were to be boxed up in a carriage."

"I don't understand," said Simon, thoughtfully. "There is no possible reason against it. You have been before?"

"Yes, with papa, often. And I know if papa were here I could get leave; but I have no one now to speak for me," added she, with childish despair.

"I will speak for you. I will do better than that, Hester. I will manage that you shall come. Leave it to me: I can't have you cheated after making a promise, can I?"

"Now then," said Colonel Lutteridge, aloud, "how is it to be? Who is going to volunteer? Now, Constance, we are all looking to you."

"We have settled it," replied she, gaily. "Agatha and I have decided, and we are going to keep our decision a secret. No one is to know anything about it to-night."

"Very astute indeed," said Captain Cotterill, who did not care two straws whether they came or not, and who wanted to be off to bed, in preparation for the early start. "Very good idea, that. We will be discretion itself, and not tempt you."

“And we will say ‘Good-bye,’ and give you no opportunity.” Accordingly “Good-bye, Good-bye,” went the round, and Hester found her cousin’s inquiring eyes seeking hers for direction, ere she had any further directions to give. She shook her head. He smiled reassuringly, and disappeared.

“I say, Bertie, don’t fail to bring your party to-morrow,” said Simon a few minutes afterwards in the hall. “Hester wants to come, and I promised her that she should.”

“Well, why shouldn’t she?”

“They are trying to knock it on the head, Constance and Agatha between them. I can manage Constance, if you can Agatha.”

He knew the weak point in Bertie’s nature, and put his finger upon it.

Manage Agatha? By Jove, he’d like to see Agatha manage *him*! “It’s just like some of her nonsense,” said he; “she never cares for these sort of things, and she is always trying to put her foot in them. What business is it of hers who goes? No one asks her to go, unless she likes. Why should not the others have their way too? Agatha is always wanting to domineer over everybody.”

To this Simon listened gravely. He thought it very likely, but he thought none the worse of Agatha for it; he only felt that for once he should like to balk the young lady.

“Jane is under her thumb,” continued Bertie, as they stood together waiting for the sisters to come down-stairs. “She will say she does not care to go either, if Agatha tells her. But Hester shall come if she wants to come. I suppose she is sure to want, too.”

“That she is, but she thinks she is not going to get the chance.”

“I’ll see to it.”

“Do ; mind you do. I’ll put it right with Constance. And be sure that you are not later than half-past six. We must be off by seven, sharp.”

Bertie knew better than to repeat a word of this. On the homeward drive he smoked a long cigar outside, and when the carriage stopped, he allowed Jem to hand his sisters out and follow them into the house before giving the coachman orders to be round at six precisely, the following morning.

Had Agatha heard, she might have remonstrated against having horses out, considering

that he and Jem only were going,—might have suggested that they could run down the slope, cross the river, and go up to the Manor in a quarter of an hour ; and had he not intended to take Hetty, so they would have done.

But Bertie's ideas of propriety, which occasionally bordered on the ridiculous, were of service to his sister in this instance. He intended both to save her extra fatigue and to enable her to appear suitably at the rendezvous.

Therefore, although he could have overborne Agatha, and silenced her on the matter, he preferred not to make it a matter of contention ; he did not wish to be asked questions which might, so he said to himself, entail fibs. He listened to his eldest sister's "None of *us* are going, Bertie," with due submission, and turned away his eyes from Hester's wistful glances.

But no sooner had all gone to their rooms, than she heard a low tap at her door, and there stood her champion, enjoying the situation.

"Look here, you're to go. Don't say a word to either of them, for there will only be a fuss, and I should think I have as good a right as Agatha has to know what papa and mamma would like. You be ready at six, and I'll come for you."

“ Oh, Bertie ! Bertie ! Stop ! ”

“ Well ? ” said Bertie, who was turning away, well pleased with his own gumption. “ What now ? It’s all settled.”

“ Oh, but there’s Constance, too. What will Constance say ? Does she know I’m coming, and does Simon ? Won’t they think it odd ? ”

“ Simon ? Not he. It was he who put me up to it. And he said he would put it right with Constance, and make her go too.”

“ Did he ? Oh, how kind of him, how good of him, how *delightful* of him, Bertie ! And oh, Bertie, thank you for coming ; you have been very, very kind too.”

“ I will say, Het, you are worth doing a thing for ; you always make the most of it.”

“ I shall make the most of this. But do stop a moment, Bertie ; what was it I wanted to say ? Oh, I know. How am I to wake in the morning ? ”

“ Tell your maid to call you, of course.”

“ But she has gone to bed—they all have ; mamma never allows us to keep them up. You forget how late it is. Nearly twelve. Oh dear ! how shall I ever get to know the time ? ” cried Hester, disturbed in the midst of her delight.

"The clock is in their room," looking at the door which opened into her sisters' larger apartment.

"And you can't fetch it? Well, no, it wouldn't do. That Agatha is as cunning as a fox. I could lend you my watch, but it wouldn't wake you; it would do no good. I'll tell you what I'll do. Perkins is to call us; I'll tell him to rap at your door——"

"That would never do."

"Then I'll send Jem."

His room was next Jem's; and as it never occurred to either of them that Bertie could by any possibility have come himself, the idea of Jem was grateful to both.

"I'll go and tell him now," continued Bertie, gently closing the door, and stealing off down the passage with the trepidation of a conspirator in spite of his bravado.

Too much excited to feel fatigue, and aware that there would be barely time for all she had to do in the morning, Hester now began cautiously taking out the hat, frock, gloves, and boots she would require to put on for the hunt.

The hazard of the enterprise, we must con-

fess, increased its attractions. The consciousness that long before her Mentor was awake or stirring she would be far beyond recall, in the midst of the wild scene her fancy kept ever before her, intoxicated her youthful blood.

Perhaps she did not herself suspect how much the glory of the enterprise was enhanced by the fact that she was eluding Agatha and aided by Simon. She was, as we know, a naughty puss, and as full of tricks as a monkey; but the time had not yet come to show what metal underlay such surface; it is the best fruits that need the hottest sun.

Sleep, Hetty thought, she could not. She tossed and turned, fevered by the prospect before her, heard the large clock in the gallery boom out "One," and thought she had been half the night awake. But the truth was, she fell into a sound slumber almost immediately afterwards, which lasted till she was aroused at day-break by a candle flashing in her eyes, and by Jem's urgent whispers to get up and make no noise.

"I was afraid they would hear me," he said. "You were having such a good sleep it was a shame to poke you up; but you'll have to look

sharp, Het, for you have only twenty minutes. It is twenty to six now."

"Oh dear. I will be as quick as ever I can."

"Never mind if we do keep the carriage five minutes or so. Only the quicker we are off, it's the safer, you know."

He had brought her his own cup of tea, Bertie having, of course, forgotten to tell Perkins there were three to be provided for; and as he stood at the bottom of the bed, shivering and rubbing his eyes, and not at all certain what sort of day it was going to be, both he and Hester felt their courage and inclination for the adventure a degree damped.

However, when she had drunk the warm beverage, and had plunged her burning face into water, and had got over the first throes of awakening, the tumultuous delight of the evening before was again astir in her bosom. She would not now have had her compact with her brother cancelled for the world. This, truth to tell, had been her first waking desire, and Jem's protestations that all he could say about the day was, that it was not raining, and it was too dark to tell more, had not tended to rekindle her ardour.

Once the flame caught, however, it lit up and burned quickly.

She slipped noiselessly from wardrobe to mirror; her dress, a trim dark serge, was well looped up; her stout boots were laced tightly and tidily on; and her hair was knotted and bundled away under a close-fitting, jaunty little hat. Had not the hair by nature been glossy, curly, and bright, it would have been a spectacle, for she was not accustomed to doing it up herself, and in her haste was even less fitted for the task than at another time she might have been; but as it was, it rippled about, and ran over her neck and brow in so pretty a fashion that even Bertie, when appealed to, could find no fault.

“You do very well,” he said. “That’s the right sort of gown. Let me look at your boots.”

These were also passed, and by that time Jem had appeared. Poor Jem! He had felt the loss of his tea, but he never spoke of it, and he did not even ask for more, as he might have done. He did not think of things—unless they were for other people.

He was several minutes later in appearing than the other two were, and they were seated in the waggonette ere he ran out, all eager ani-

mation now, in the ragged jacket—which had, by the way, been mended, but was scarcely improved by the process—while on his head the oldest cap he could select from the crowd on the hat-stand was pulled down over his left ear.

“What a fright Jem always is!” said his brother, turning round from the box-seat, where he was already perched, the reins in his hand—Jem had darted into the house again for something—“it’s of no use speaking to him, he is always the same.”

He himself was as nicely got up in the rough as one need wish to be; and he thought that he and Hester, without any further addition to their party, would have been presentable on the occasion. However, as he said, it was of no use speaking; and luckily, he for once acted on the sentiment.

“I wish we were off!” cried Hetty, intent on that alone.

“Oh, we shall do very well. It is only three minutes past the hour now, and we did not reckon on getting off before five minutes past. Look alive, Jem!”

“Do, Jem, come! I am sure I heard a win-

dow open," from Hester. She was shivering in the cold air, the particularly chilly atmosphere of breaking dawn.

"Eh? All right," responded Jem. "Only went to get a rug. It *is* cold," getting under it himself, as he huddled it round his sister. "All right now," to Bertie, who, enveloped from head to foot in his comfortable overcoat, cast an eye of contempt on the shabby covering.

"They ought to have some new carriage-rugs," he made a mental note, but outwardly he only observed, "Shut the door, Perkins," to the sleepy footman, who, now that he was awake and up, half hoped to be allowed to attend the party. "And I say," turning the horses slowly round, "we shall put up at the Manor, so let Miss Manners know not to expect us till she sees us. Will that do, Hetty?" added he, with an audible chuckle, whereof both groom and footman understood the meaning perfectly. It was to him a rare feat to score off his sister thus.

As the carriage turned, and the horses set off at a brisk trot over the gravel, the noise they made at such an hour seemed startling and unearthly. The still house, with its windows shut-

tered and doors closed, the solemn silence over all the land, gave to the rattle of their wheels a defiant, indecorous sound. Rooks flew in and out among the trees in much concern. Here and there a heron started from the marsh, and the flap of its wings arose by the roadside. The sun crept up in a faint pale glow on the eastern horizon. More and more distinct grew the landscape, and pearly mists spread themselves, and vanished into air above the woods.

No mistake now about the day. It was all that could be wished, more than had been hoped for. A bank of light feathery clouds just veiled its brightness, and the heavy dew which glittered on the grass foretold heat.

The party were in excellent time; some had arrived before them, but many more came after.

Nothing could be more agreeable to the feelings of all than to find their cousin at the hall-door avowedly looking for their waggonette, to be brought by him to the dining-room, and seated at his own end of the table. He took Jem by the arm, as he gently pushed him into his seat, with an extra, "Glad to see you, old fellow;" he extolled Bertie for the masterly

manner in which he had executed his part of the bargain, and he looked into Hester's face with a smile.

Then Constance was sent for. He had not been remiss—he had made her understand that she must go ; and she had, as she invariably did, acceded immediately to a command taking the form of a request. “Oh dear, yes. He might depend on her. What fun to cheat Agatha !”

But nevertheless she was not quite sure whether more were intended than met the ear. He had said that possibly Jane, and certainly Hester, would come. Could it be Jane, then ?

CHAPTER VIII.

WALKING AFTER THE OTTER-HOUNDS.

“ Bind me, ye woodbines, in your twines ;
 Curl me about, ye gadding vines ;
 Do you, O brambles, chain me too ;
 And, courteous briars, nail me through.”
 —MARVELL.

ONE point was clear—she was not going to put herself about for Hester.

She durst not play Jane false ; but when a peep from behind her window-blind, as wheels were heard approaching by the Wancote entrance, assured her that it was only Hetty’s black hat which surmounted the old wrapper, she laughed to herself, and popped back into bed again.

She thought that Simon had inclined to gratify Hester’s whim out of the general wish to oblige which all now ascribed to him, and that he had no idea that such an act would annoy Agatha.

But knowing Agatha as she did, Constance laughed long and heartily.

It diverted her to the last degree to think how, supposing there were nothing even but cousinly friendliness between the two, he must unwittingly have offended against it. And supposing there were, or were ever to be, anything more?

It was very funny, and she enjoyed her joke all the more thoroughly that she could have her laugh out among the comfortable sheets, and had not to rise and dress for her *rôle* of duenna, one which was never to her taste, and which, under such circumstances, would have been doubly repugnant.

As for little Hester, why should the child not go and enjoy herself? She was quite glad Hester should have the treat, and thought all the better of her for having shown spirit enough to brave her all-powerful sister, and come in spite of her; but it would be sheer nonsense to trouble herself in the matter.

As to breaking faith with Simon, that was easily arranged. Her maid was sent down with apologies, and explanations that her mistress had a headache, was unable to rise, and had

begged not to be disturbed. If any of the ladies had come, she hoped they would kindly excuse her, and would not mind going without her.

Thus, at the expense of only a few "white lies," which were not only fabricated in presence of the woman who knew them to be such, but were again palmed off by her, at her mistress's desire, on Colonel Lutteridge, Constance secured her morning.

Her only fear was lest Hester's heart should fail. Hester, she opined, was a shrewd little thing; and if she had come relying on the support and countenance of her cousin, she might, on receiving the excuse, draw back from the expedition also.

This would not do. She could not have Hester at home and have to practise headache all the morning. She wanted to be about, bustling hither and thither; had notes to write; a new riding-habit to try on; above all, a call to make, which could only be made that forenoon.

It was this call, more than anything beside, that had with her damned the otter-hunt from the first.

Constance, ever alive to self, had, immediately she found that it lay between paying a civility

to Lady Westmacott and the minor affair of pleasing the girls, resolved on her course. Lady Westmacott, with whom she chose to fancy herself a favourite, and who, little aware of her real character, spoke of her as a charming creature, and accepted her attentions graciously, was about to leave England, and Constance's only opportunity of conveying to her certain information which might be useful on her travels was on this identical Wednesday. Lady Westmacott was to leave by the afternoon train.

On one point, however, justice must be done her.

She was regardless of truth, and careless as to her breach of faith, but she was not to blame concerning Hester personally; she was not putting her cousin into a position she would herself have shrunk from. She was not, as we know, particular; and if there was no harm in a thing—no positive, tangible, ostensible harm—she cared little for appearances. She would merely have forced herself to go with either of the other sisters because evasion would have been useless; they would have remained behind too. But she did not imagine that Hester would be so absurd—the idea was in her eyes simply absurd—and the event proved her to be right.

Hester never thought of it ; and although she sought her eldest brother's eye immediately the message was received, she was prepared to combat scruples, not to suggest them.

Bertie was known to be scrupulous, and accordingly she half expected him to raise a difficulty. He did not.

"Constance not going?" was all he said. "Well, never mind, Het ; you keep by me as long as you can, and then you can hang on to Jem."

"Nothing of the sort," said his cousin. "Hester shall be under my charge, and you two have your sport, and don't think more about her. Constance ought to have said so before," he added, his tone betraying annoyance. "I suppose there is no harm in her going, though?" aside to Bertie.

Bertie vowed there was not ; again protested his intention of burdening himself with the care of her—at any rate, as long as he could—and had a comfortable certainty that when he should find her in the way, she would have her cousin to fall back upon.

"After all, people must please themselves," observed Simon, more cheerfully. "Now, Hester, do you see, I have got you to look after, and am

responsible for delivering you up safe and sound at the end of the day. If you get tired, or think you have had enough of it, you have nothing to do but to tell me, and I will find means to send you home. Now, I suppose, we are all ready. I don't know when I have seen a finer day, Cotterill."

"Capital. Excellent. Now," said Cotterill, with a pleasant air of deference, "where would you like us to try first? Round the lake?"

"Just where you please. They say the lake is as good a place as any. Are the dogs in front?"

They were waiting outside, some eight or ten couple of wiry, true-bred otter-hounds, clustering round the whip, and emitting little ejaculatory yelps of anticipation and pleasure.

"Nice-looking set, eh?" said Cotterill, eyeing them with pride.

He had not long been master, and was rather pleased with his position, his pink suit, and his horn. They became him, he thought, very well.

He was an airy little fellow, with a pale face, and a fragile form that gave no indications of the amount of work it was proved capable of going through.

"Nice - looking, eh? Don't you think

so ?” he said. “Hie, then — Scurry, Diver, Wanderer, Rally, Screech,—hie - up ! hie-up ! Whoo—oo—oo—oop !”

A crowd of people had collected in the background, armed with sticks, and eager for the sport. Every sort of rough fantastic garb was there, from the baggy, shapeless, but whole and decent suit of the farmer, to the keeper’s cast-off velveteens, seeing their last days on the keeper’s boy. All stood waiting for the move, and, after the usual delays, it began with a general skirmish round the lake.

Expectations were of course immediate, and false alarms rife even from the start.

“This is all foolery,” said young Manners to young Parker ; “Cotterill knows that as well as we do. There are the whole lot off after a hare !”

Off they were, bustling, pushing, and jumping the underwood ; back they all came again, no whit the wiser.

Another hare, and the same result.

Little groups trotted about, and posted themselves at different stations of presumable merit, the more ardent following closely behind the huntsman’s “Yo-ho la ! For—ard ! for—ard !”

and themselves stirring up the bushes on the banks. The wary, meanwhile, lit their pipes and bided their time.

To them even, however, there was in due course communicated a thrill of excitement. An otter had been seen, or it was thought it had been seen; it had taken to the water, and had swum to the island. The next intimation was that it had turned a point, and had entered the mouth of a slovenly streamlet which fed the lake from the upper end. Two distinct parties were formed, and both had seen the otter. It was plain that though Cotterill had an ear for all, he believed none. He listened, questioned, and shook his head, made a feint of pursuing up the streamlet, but would not be troubled to take boat for the island.

Meantime Hester walked and stood between her eldest brother and her cousin. So far, so long as nothing else allured him from her side, Bertie was quite attentive. Two or three neighbouring squires were of their party, and they were occasionally joined by the master, but at this juncture she saw nothing of Jem. Jem was not needed, and accordingly was not there. With his unsightly cap well down over his ear, he

was the life of the rabble, the leader of every forlorn hope, the discoverer of otters' heads in every blackened stump and stone.

"This is all very nice," said Lutteridge, waking up suddenly, "but it is not otter-hunting. Cotterill, let us take to the river."

Every one but he knew why Cotterill had not taken to the river long before,—that the master was but paying the compliment which was supposed due to the little lake in front of the Manor, in searching its banks, because once, years before, an otter had been killed there. Ever after, when hounds were in the neighbourhood, they were supposed to make a raid at some time or other on the lake; and going from Lutteridge itself, Cotterill imagined he could do no less than begin with it.

He now gave the recall joyously, and all made off to the river. They were to pursue up the other side, and it was this which had prevented carriages following, as there was no road near.

When they arrived at the boathouse they found the Wancote boats had been brought over to aid the transit, and it was accordingly soon effected. The boats were of fair size and well packed.

In the last were the master, the two elderly squires, Colonel Lutteridge, and Miss Manners. They pushed out into the cool misty flood, with the hounds frolicking round the stern; some of the younger ones attempting to lay their paws on the sides, while the older and calmer, disdain- ing such child's play, merely raised an eye from time to time to see that all was well, as they swam steadily behind.

“Are you still good for the walk?” inquired Cotterill, as he handed Hester out. “I pre- sume we are in your own grounds now, would you—— Down, sir! down! get down, I say!” to the hounds, who were now, with dripping coats, sprawling all over him in their affec- tion. “Would you like to be rowed up a little way?” suggested the little man, kindly. “You could see a good deal, at least if you keep up with us, and there is a boat going. Only you will have to keep mid-stream.”

She would not hear of it.

Accordingly off they all set up the river. At first with no more success than had attended their onset on the lake. A mile or so was passed, and there was still the same halting, indecision, uncertainty, and disappointment.

Suddenly breaks out one prolonged cry. "Boo—oo—oo—oo!" "Boo—oo—oo—oo!" goes another and another. At last every hound is in it. "By Jove, they are off at last!" cries Bertie Manners, and, throwing aside his cigar, he dashes to the front. Cotterill, in his excitement, is almost dancing there already; languid energies are revived, as if a new breath of life had been poured into them; all discontent is at an end, and every nerve is strained to keep up with the pace at which the hounds have now started.

Somewhere about the centre of the crowd Lutteridge hurried his charge along. To each of his steps she took one and a half, until at length, as in his eagerness the strides grew longer and longer, even that accompaniment proving impracticable, her dignity fairly gave way, and she broke into a run, or rather a series of short runs, with intervals of walking, during which she fell visibly behind.

Both were too full of the sport to think or care.

"How beautiful it is! How glorious it is!" broke out Hester once, when a sudden opening in front showed the scene along the banks of the smoothly-rolling stream, over which the mists were breaking in the sunlight. "Listen to that

deep note ! That is old Lottery, I am sure,—the one that followed us so—close—behind—the——”

“Don’t talk, Hester. Save all your breath now.”

She trotted along in silence.

“We are keeping up famously,” said Simon, after some minutes, looking over his shoulder ; “there are numbers behind. How are you holding out ?”

“Oh, I have not begun to think of ‘holding out’ yet.”

“Quick here !” said he, hustling her over a fence—he almost lifted her, but she did not notice it. “Now then, Hester, across the field. Do you see that point up there ? If we make straight for it, and they don’t find before we come up with them, we shall be in the very first ranks.”

“I see.”

“You are getting out of breath. You won’t manage it, I fear.”

“It is only—going—uphill.”

Uphill, however, they must go ; and although the pace was slackened, she was obliged, after another few minutes, to acknowledge that she could not keep it up.

“Don’t wait for me. Go on—do go on. I won’t be waited for.”

“No one is waiting for you. You can walk as well as the best of us. There is really no hurry,”—philosophically surveying several who were now passing them on the way. “Let them go,” said Simon, with excellent contempt. “They will only have to stand still afterwards!”

“No, they won’t. Don’t you see? Look below—they are gaining on us.”

He came to a full stop. “I intend to remain here.”

She looked thunderstruck.

“Here! We shall see nothing!—we shall be left behind altogether! Oh, why here?” cried Hester, clasping her hands with mingled entreaty and despair.

“Where, then?”

“Anywhere but here. Rather up there at the wall;—but why should we stop at all?”

“True; we will go on, now that you are all right again.”

She understood. It was on her account—it was out of sheer consideration for her—that he had tricked her thus into a halt. But how ill-timed was the kindness! What could it matter,

she argued, now that her heart beat less violently, since she was going down-hill again with comparative ease,—what could it signify if she had been a little out of breath? And that minute's pause had cost them the loss of their position; they might be still fairly well up, but they could not head the little band below, as she had hoped to do.

In the heat of the moment, and in her mental strife betwixt gratitude and indignation, all fear of Simon vanished.

She who had considered, on her first walk with him, that nothing would ever induce her to take a fence in his presence, now hopped over them like a bird, and her artless expressions of delight, when another short-cut enabled them, after all, to obtain the coveted post in the van, were unchecked by any doubts as to his sympathy. He was as proud as she.

The hounds were still giving tongue steadily—another half mile, another mile was passed, and at length some of the less sturdy were fain to lag behind.

Gradually the single huntress present felt herself dropping back also. She struggled bravely, would not own to weariness, and alleged that,

were the pace a little less severe, she could hold out yet awhile. She could walk, but she could not run ; and, unfortunately, many besides herself were obliged to take an occasional trot.

Again she begged to be left to take her chance. Cotterill assured everybody that it could not go on much longer ; the otter was being repeatedly sighted, and at any moment the chase might cease.

Then they might return for her, affirmed Hester ; or if not, there was old Mr Parker far behind, he was evidently not coming much further, she would fall back and keep in his company. To this even Jem yielded. He had walked with her, on her other side, since the second cut across had brought her to the front, and had pushed her along by the elbow in a way that was excruciatingly uncomfortable, but which she could not induce him to believe she would be better without.

It was a relief when he ran on, suggesting that he would send back old Hutchin, their own old forester, to take Hester home, if she chose to leave off altogether. He would tell Hutchin to be in the way, and she could signal to him if he was wanted, at any moment.

“Never mind about Hester at all,” bellowed back his cousin. “Run on, old fellow ! Don’t miss the death !”

“I am keeping you, now,” said Hester, sadly. “It is a pity I came.”

“Indeed it is not,” said Simon, patting her shoulder kindly. “It is anything but a pity. You are the best little walker in the world, and ought not to have been left behind to-day, whoever was. Hester, I had no idea girls could walk like this.”

“Like this ! And I have spoilt all your sport !”

“Do I look as if you had spoilt my sport ? I say ! What’s that ? They are at fault ! Upon my word they are ! Don’t hurry—take it easy—take it easy,—we shall be up with them after all.”

“No ; they are off again, harder than ever !”

“What a despairing voice ! Hester, if you speak like that, I shall turn myself back into the ogre again !”

There had been a laugh over this, on the wet day at Wancote—over Jem and Hester’s walk, which had frightened them both out of their wits,—none of the older trio, of course, being supposed to have participated in their feelings.

He, too, had confessed. He had owned that he had not supposed his youngest cousin to be within three years of her age, and there had been a great jubilee of mirth over this at the poor little sister's expense. She had blushed afterwards at the recollection, being mortified, as was natural, and had resolved to show herself a very prude on every possible occasion.

But the feeling died away when alone with Simon; it was only in the presence of the others, under their smiles, that she resented the little fatherly airs which he almost from the first assumed towards her. Even when he went a step further she took it in good part, so long as they were by themselves: he might tease, provided no one were at hand to hear.

This exactly suited Simon, who hated to be heard. He had taken a liking to the little thing who was so easily moved to smiles and tears, who was merry, vexed, dignified, and babyish, all in half-a-dozen minutes.

He could not now let her dwell on the idea which was tormenting her—on the misery of feeling herself in the way.

“I say, Hester, what will Agatha think of all this?”

“Agatha? Why, what made you think of Agatha?”

“Because I have a great respect for Agatha. Constance tells me that she is a very remarkable person. And I have no doubt,” slyly, “that she understands the art of keeping younger sisters in order.”

“She does not always understand the art of finding them,” said Hetty, with a joyful laugh. “Did Bertie tell you how we came away to-day?”

“No, but I guessed. You stole off while they were all asleep. Was that it? Fie, Hester. I think you must be a very naughty little girl! I would not have believed it of you, Hester. Now you have got your feet wet, and your clothes torn, and your hair disordered! Let me take a look at you. Yes, it is just as I thought. By this time, if you had stayed at home and had risen at a proper hour, you would have been sitting at your nursery breakfast——”

“With my pinafore on!”

“With your pinafore on. With your hair nicely brushed back behind your ears, and a blue ribbon tied round your waist. Then your nurse would have brought in a bowl of warm

bread-and-milk, and you would have had your own silver spoon given you to eat it with. You see I know all about it. That is what my other little niece is doing at this moment."

"I am not your niece."

"You are my cousin, are you? Oh!" a pause. "You are not quite so young as Ellen, then? How many years are there between you and her?"

"Nearly as many as between you and me."

"So? I am a sort of father to you then, am I?"

"A sort of father? Yes. Only a *sort* of father, mind. You are not to punish me, nor to scold me, nor to say 'No' to me, whatever I want."

"On those conditions you shall be a sort of child to me. You are not to be scolded, nor to be punished, nor to say 'No' to whatever I bid you."

Still the otter was not found.

The otter was there, beyond doubt, and on and on the pursuers went, but imperceptibly they had fallen into a steady march, and there was none of the wild enthusiasm of the outset. Another quarter of an hour went by. The dogs began to drop off, and to the unspeak-

able disgust of all, at length their music altogether ceased. The hunt came to a standstill, stragglers made their way down the banks, and up again, and heated faces and mud-girt figures gathered in general consternation.

Jem, wet to the waist, burst through the thicket, close to where his cousin and sister stood. Whatever it was to others, it was a moment of triumph to her. She was there; many had fallen away, and there were others still to be seen in the distance, coming after, but far behind; but she had not given in. She could not but feel a glow of complacency, and the general disappointment scarcely extended to her breast.

“It is very vexatious,” said Cotterill’s cheerful voice. “What do you think? Shall we try further, or go to the stream?”

“I should not go further, I think,” said Colonel Lutteridge, to whom the appeal was made.

“The stream is always a good place,” subjoined Jem.

“Anything you please. Shall I turn them, then? It seems a pity; they are still snuffing about. Suppose we wait a minute. I will go on, and see what our whip thinks.”

"I say," said Bertie to his brother, aside, "how did we come to lose the brute?"

"Oh, he wasn't half pressed."

"Cotterill doesn't know his business. Parker is disgusted. Think of our going no harder than that: we have regularly crawled over the last half mile. Holloa!" shouted Bertie, suddenly. "They are off again! *By Jove!* HE'S HERE!!"

Both dashed forward, Lutteridge after them. There was a splash, a worry in the water, and the thing was done.

The otter had risen to the surface, and had been strangled almost before he had been seen. One good dog had done the job, as the rest were moving on to Cotterill's chirrup forward, and only the three cousins saw the end.

Great was Hester's relief to have it so: the boughs hid the scene from her, and as it had been the only part of the day she had secretly dreaded, she was well pleased to have it over.

The head and pads duly cut off, "Now then," said the master, with renewed spirit, "Where next?"

"The stream," said Jem, in an undertone.

"The stream," said his brother, aloud.

No voice being raised in opposition, whatever

may have been secret desires to the contrary, to the stream they all turned.

The walking was now rougher than any they had yet gone through. The brushwood was one thick tangle, and every attempt at a footpath lost itself in the surrounding woods.

Several who thought they had had enough, slipped away unperceived, and there were plenty of opportunities for Hester to have returned had she been so disposed. But her blood was up, and she scorned the idea. Go back now? No indeed. As long as they walked she would walk; none of them were inclined to go fast, and she was more fit for steady lengthy exertion than she had been an hour before.

Her cousin laughed and backed her up. She had been in at the death, he averred, and must not tarnish her reputation by fighting shy of the end of the hunt.

It must of necessity be short. The day was already far advanced, and little more could be done.

In another half hour, "Do you know how long we have been at it?" he cried. "Four hours and a half! What is Cotterill thinking of? Every otter is in its den and asleep by this time!"

"If you please, sir," said a groom, coming up, "we had orders to send the break and the waggonette to Barley Hill, in case Miss or any of the gentlemen would like to drive back. They are there now, sir."

"Ah! a good idea. Let the gentlemen know, Dick. 'Miss' won't be sorry at all, I should say," giving her his hand over a ditch. "Poor little 'Miss'! she has done her very best. Upon my word *I* am tired. I am grateful to Constance. She has done the right thing this time."

But ere they could reach the carriages they were caught in a shower, and had to shelter in a deserted cottage half way down to the meeting-place.

"You were left rather in the lurch to-day, Hester?" said Simon, who had been wondering what she had thought about it. "Constance in sending the carriages wished to make some atonement to you, I suppose."

"Not to me. She would not think about me."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't suppose she would."

“Don’t you think she treated you shabbily?”

“Well,” said Hester, truthfully, “I think she did a little.” Both knew how to interpret the headache, and made no pretence of belief in it. “But then, you know,” added she, too happy not to be benevolent, “she would think it was only me. Of course I could not expect her to trouble herself about me.”

“You think she would not?”

“I am sure she would not. She doesn’t think anything of me, you know.”

“Oh, you are mistaken. She told me the other day that you were the clever one of the family.”

“Just what I hate to be called.”

“What!” said Simon, opening his eyes.

“Clever! The very thing of all others it is most disagreeable to have put down to you. If there is an ugly duck in any family—one of whom nothing else can be put forward—she is sure to be called ‘clever.’”

“Then I suppose,” said he, immensely amused, “that you are the ugly duck, or rather duckling. You are not quite a duck yet, Hester, though I own that you are growing. Let me see, I should not mind now people saying that I was clever.

On the whole, I think it is a reputation that might be endured. Well, what now?" added he, quickly, catching a sight of her face. "What is that quizzical look for? There is something passing through your mind which it would be more salutary than agreeable to my feelings to hear. Now then for it! Come, there is not a soul to tell, and I won't bring you into a scrape, I swear."

"Nonsense!"

"That was quite an Agatha's 'Nonsense!' That should have been said *to* Hester—not *by* Hester. But come, I must have the meaning of that look."

Whatever had been the meaning, it had vanished—nothing now remained of it; and in its place was a blush of confusion.

"I don't know——" Then she stopped. She could not with truth affirm that she did not know what he meant.

"You do not think me clever, eh?" said Simon, after a pause.

He was exactly right. It was a discovery which, when announced at home, had been received with derision; and, in consequence, Hester had made a stand by it. She had been sure,

certain, pertinacious in adhering to her opinion that their new cousin was not the brilliant light the others took him for.

Clever or not, he had at any rate been quick enough in detecting something of the kind in her face, however, and he was not to be put off.

“Was that it?” said he, sticking to his point.

Still no reply.

“Oh, don’t mind,” with rather a forced laugh. “Pluck up heart and have it out, Hester. You don’t think me clever enough to have ventured on such an observation?”

She was now crimson.

“Am I not clever?” said Simon, with mock piteousness. “Well,” he added, presently, seeing it was hopeless to expect an answer, “you have been hard upon me, I think. I merely said I could stand being *called* clever—observe, I laid not the slightest claim to being so; and if ever a little malicious fiend got up and looked out of a pair of eyes, one did at that moment out of yours, my cousin!”

PART III.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN COTTERILL DISCOVERS HESTER TO BE PRETTY.

“ A fair and meaning face, an eye of fire,
That checked the bold, and made the free retire.”

—CRABBE.

THE carriages were duly found at Barley Hill, and were by no means an unwelcome sight even to the most vigorous of the otter-hunters.

Although Hester was handed inside by her cousin, instead of up to the box-seat beside him, as she had half expected to be, she was too tired and too happy to mind. Cotterill, who had entirely overlooked her on the previous evening, was astonished to find the face opposite him not only pretty, but brilliant with colour, and aglow with animation. He had admired the other sisters, Jane especially. Her quiet elegance struck him even more than Agatha's beauty.

He had thought them both agreeable, but had not discovered until their departure that there was a third Miss Manners in the room; he had fancied the young lady in white belonged to another set of people.

On her first appearance the next morning she had been colourless and silent. It was only as she freshened with exercise, excitement, and the morning air, that he discovered she was worth looking at—found a resemblance between her and Jane.

To be sure she was smaller, rounder, more youthful, and less coy; she had not Jane's air nor her distinguishing grace, but she was pretty—she was perhaps, in the mere countenance, handsomer than her sister. An opportunity for instituting a comparison occurred sooner than he had anticipated.

Collected in the bow-window, and smiling down upon them as they drove past to the door, were other ladies besides their hostess.

The two eldest Miss Manners' had driven over, in their pretty hats and pelisses, dainty from head to foot, and with a pleasant security of welcome in their faces.

This was the secret Constance had spoken of

on the night before ; this was the agreement which she and Agatha had entered into, but which none of the gentlemen were to be informed of. It was to be quite a novelty. Constance's suggestion that silence on the subject would not only protect them from farther importunity, but would also make a charming surprise when the other pleasures of the morning had gone by, had completely satisfied Agatha.

When, after all, Simon upset everything by his clumsiness, and told his sister-in-law that he and Bertie had made another arrangement, she was only half alarmed.

She thought she could reckon on Agatha, and her curiosity did not do more than just rouse her to look out with momentary interest, when the carriage drove up by the Wancote entrance. Very few other neighbours came that way, and none were likely to have driven, since all the principal houses of the neighbourhood lay on the other side of Lutteridge.

When Hester alone was visible to the scrutiny of her cousin, Constance, as we know, had jumped back into bed with a laugh.

When, shortly after twelve, Agatha and Jane

arrived, true to their appointment, she received them with open arms at the front door. She had made her call, and Lady Westmacott had been so kind, and so much obliged, and so entirely all that she had been expected to be, that Constance was quite in love with herself for the way she had managed. It was something to have pleased Lady Westmacott; it was nothing to have cheated Hester.

“I did just tell one little fib,” she confided, as she slipped her arm through Agatha’s, ascending the steps. “When Simon got quite teasing about my going I was obliged to call up a headache. I had promised you, had I not, dear? And we were sworn to secrecy, so I could not divulge our plan. You would have thought me wicked, now wouldn’t you, if you had heard I had gone off with them after all? Well, you know, he would take no denial; I suppose he had heard of my pedestrian feats, for he caught me on the stairs last night, and said I *must* go, and that some of you were certainly coming. Of course I said ‘yes,’ to pacify the man, although I was *quite sure* he was mistaken. Then this morning I sent down an apology.”

“But where is Hester?” inquired Agatha,

evading giving her opinion of a line of conduct her conscience disapproved. "I suppose she stayed with you?" she added, a sudden dismay seizing her as she saw Hester nowhere. She had made sure either that both had gone or that both had stayed. When she saw Constance she was at once relieved on her sister's account, convinced that where one was the other would also be found. Surely, surely Constance could not have been so regardless of appearances as to send the child alone with the hunt.

Even Constance quailed for a moment before the eye turned upon her; but she rallied, resolved at least not to show that she had done so.

"Oh, we are all among friends," she said, lightly. "Old Mr Parker will take care of Hester; and she has Bertie and Jem as well. Simon, too—dear old fellow—is as good as a dozen chaperons. She will come to no harm among them. I have been out myself often when I was the only lady, and every one knew how it was to-day."

Agatha said nothing; even Jane looked grave.

"If she had disliked going, you know," continued Constance, shabbily diverting the blame from herself, "she could have come up to me."

“Did you send for her?”

“Oh no, I did not interfere. You see I did not know what to do, they were off in such a hurry, before I was half awake. It was all Simon’s fault for being so stupid. You must speak to *him*, Agatha, if you think my uncle and aunt would be displeased. Perhaps it would be better not to say anything to them, or”—reading Agatha’s feelings aright at the suggestion—“if that would be improper, just tell them that it was all a mistake. Perhaps I had better be the one to make the apologies. When do they come home?”

They were expected that evening. “Let me say how it was, then,” cried Constance. “I would not have *you*, Agatha, blamed for the world. Simon and I—oh, and Bertie, for, after all, he was in the conspiracy too,—we must take each a share. We must not let it fall on the poor little naughty monkey’s head alone, though we may administer a little private rebuke to her on our own account; now does that satisfy you?”

It could not satisfy, but it could silence.

Nothing could now exceed Constance’s complaisance towards them; and when Ellen came

in dressed for company, the sisters could talk to her, and endeavouring to forget what it was awkward for the time to remember, laugh themselves into good-humour before the carriages drove up.

It was hard upon Hester to have to appear at such a moment. Rosy and bright she could not but look; but in all else she did not certainly contrast well with the other ladies. Her hair had long ago escaped its bonds, and fell in long waving locks over her shoulders; her necktie was loose, her hat on one side, and her dress, which had been hastily let down to hide a muddy petticoat, only half did its office.

Constance, however, flew to her.

“You dear bad thing, what have you been about? Come, give an account of yourself. Captain Cotterill, we lay this at your door,” wishing to draw him forward. “But I arraign Hester before the tribunal,” taking her hand with a mock grimace. “Now Agatha and Jane, ye judges, what must be done to this offender, charged with high treason against your most august and righteous authority?”

“Lead the prisoner away, I should say,” interposed a voice from behind.

“To what, most noble Colonel? Are you too sitting on this court-martial?” Constance wheeled about to face her brother-in-law, still holding the culprit fast. “I should have thought,” she added, “that your place were fitter before the bar than on the bench.”

“I humbly submit. Let us both depart, if not to bread and water, at least to water. Take her to your room, Constance,” he added, aside, “and make her fit to appear before luncheon.”

Accordingly a quarter of an hour elapsed before the party reassembled in the drawing-room.

A few pretty frills, and the deft fingers of a clever maid, had trimmed Hetty up, so that she no longer, even in Agatha's eyes, appeared unsightly; and as she stole quietly in and began playing with Ellen in a corner, she did not for the present draw down the reprimand which she was well aware hung over her head.

When Simon came in, which was not for some minutes after, he looked at the two for a moment, and made as if he would have advanced towards them, but stopped short with a laugh, and addressed Agatha.

"They make a nice little pair, don't they?"

"Very."

"You and Jane must come to-morrow," continued her cousin, changing the subject. "If it is as fine a morning as this was, it will be delightful. And we will have luncheon brought with us, and make a day of it."

Her face brightened.

"What do you say, Cotterill?" he went on. "How do you like the idea? When the hunt is over, instead of returning here for luncheon, we will drive further on, as far as we can, and turn the expedition into a picnic."

"Charming!" said Cotterill, looking at Jane.

"What we had to-day was hardly fit for ladies," pursued he, confidentially. "It was uncommonly rough walking, but your sister stood it out magnificently. I hope she will not be the worse for her exertions. *You* were wise not to attempt it; it was too much for a lady—altogether too much. To-morrow, now—that is an excellent idea of Lutteridge's."

So all thought.

"We had a glorious start," continued Cotterill; "but we had one heavy shower, about an hour ago. By the way, Lutteridge, you had the

best of it—you and Miss Manners finding such snug quarters in that old hut. I got drenched.”

“Why did you not shelter there yourself, then? You must have been close to us.”

“Never saw you till it was over. We caught sight of you just as——”

“Now Agatha. That means luncheon. Will you come?”

The first roll of the gong had hardly made itself heard ere Simon offered his arm, and carried her off rather hastily, cutting short any further communications, whatever might have been their nature; but she observed nothing—only felt pleased to be led to the dining-room by him and seated at his right hand.

“What waterspouts you have about here,” pursued Cotterill, seizing his opportunity, and following with his fair companion close behind the other two. “There is a deluge about your ears before you know where you are. Seems to have been a good deal of rain about everywhere lately, though.”

He had not got beyond the rain before he had found places for them at the table; but by the time all were seated he had thought of something more to say.

“I don’t suppose we shall have much snow this winter. They say these wet summers make wet winters. For my part, I like a wet winter ; don’t you ?”

She assented—at least she thought she did ; even the pliable Jane could not be quite sure on such a question without more argument to hold by, more reason given why she should now like what she had hitherto disliked.

“There’s nothing to be done in snow,” continued Cotterill, instructing her. “You can’t hunt, or fish, or shoot, or anything in snow ; and as for town, it is simply awful. Oh, there is nothing like a good open winter with lots of rain.”

“He sticks to the rain,” muttered Hester, who, having no one to talk to—no one at least who cared about being talked to—by her side, could afford to listen. “He finds something more to say about it after every pause. How can Jane look so pleased, so interested ? How can she bend her head like that to a man who talks about nothing but rain ?” Then the little critic turned the other way. “And if Simon talked to me and looked at me as he is talking to Agatha and looking at her now, I should like

as little to have anything to do with him. What a mouth, what an eye he has ! He looks as hard as flint and as stiff as a poker. So ! you are looking at me now, Colonel Lutteridge ! Pray, what may that look mean ? You have not said a word to me since I came in ; but don't suppose that I care for that. You may talk away to Agatha just as much as ever you like for me. What a wooden physiognomy ! So that is the sort of face Agatha gets, is it ? ”

Apparently Agatha was content with the face.

She thought her cousin more pleasant and animated than she had ever before seen him. He was even talkative. True, every word he said might have been put into a trumpet and sounded aloud to the company, but then there was no need for it to have been anything else. She was not, like Hester, exacting. To be talked to, to be asked what she would have, to be given some account of the sport, and invited to participate in it on the next occasion, was quite enough. She wanted no special looks, no suggestive undertones.

Such, if addressed to herself, would have been

beyond her ; had she overheard or seen them, when intended for another, her spirit would have recoiled.

Hester's frank give-and-take in conversation was a puzzle to her eldest sister. She could not see a jest herself, ere Hetty had responded to it, and flitted off to something else. She felt herself left behind—stranded, as it were, on some barren beach, while the fairy bark skimmed backwards and forwards over the sparkling wavelets ; and in consequence, when at length she lumbered off, she bore down upon the little bark heavily at times. Hester, she said, chattered—was too free, too careless. It was all very well when they were alone—she was not disposed to be quarrelsome, like Bertie—but the line must be drawn somewhere, and for Hester's own sake she regarded it as part of her bounden duty to point out this line.

“How could you not even let us know ?” she murmured, aside, luncheon being over ; but her tone was certainly less arbitrary than might have been anticipated.

“I knew you would stop me,” replied her sister.

“Of course I should. You ought never to

have gone, but it was not your fault as much as Bertie's and Constance's."

"And Simon's."

"Simon's? No; he had nothing to do with it."

"That he had, Agatha. It was he who asked for me, and I shall feel grateful to him all my life for it."

"Nonsense. I shall tell mamma that you were not to blame so much as——"

"Come, come!" cried Constance from behind. "We are not going to have lectures, curtain or no curtain. Come out from behind there, you two. I have undertaken to stand your friend, Hester: Agatha, you know, I told you so. I am going to drive you and Jane over by-and-by, in time to see the parents arrive, and tell my own tale. We will let these wild otter-hunters out of the way first. Hetty, the carriage is at the door."

An arrangement so agreeable to her feelings could not but put the dominant sister into fresh good-humour; she stayed chatting in the drawing-room, watching the departures from the window, and ready to receive Colonel Lutteridge whenever he chose to return to her with becoming complacency.

He was some time in coming.

The hall was full of loungers—some seeking their hats and sticks, some making further appointments,—all filling up the room, and making ingress and egress alike a slow process.

“Look here, Hester,” said her cousin, coming up to her, “what did you do with that stick I gave you to walk with?”

“It is up-stairs ; I will fetch it.”

“If I were to treat you as you deserve,” said he, looking hard at her, and holding her by the arm at the same time, “I should let you go. But I won’t be cruel—here is the stick ; how comes it here?”

“I suppose you brought it down.”

“There was no need to bring it down ; it was never taken up. I found it lying on the floor in the drawing-room. That is the way you treat my presents.”

She laughed and held out her hand.

“No ; you will have to walk again to-morrow to regain it.”

“Come along, Het. What have you lost ? Your stick ? That’s it, isn’t it ?” said Bertie. “Look at mine ; it is the best of the set. I say,” to his cousin, “it’s awfully good of you to give it me, you know.”

“Take any you like,” said Simon, coldly. “Will you leave it here, to be ready for you to-morrow?”

“No, no. Suppose some one else takes a fancy to it before to-morrow! Take my advice, and bring away yours too, Hester.”

“It is not hers yet.” Bertie had turned away, and this was for his sister only.

“And suppose, as he says, some one else takes a fancy to it in the meantime?” said she.

“I’ll take care that they do not.”

“Did he not give you yours after all?” cried Bertie, afterwards. “That was too bad. It was not much of a thing either.”

“I am to get it to-morrow. Oh, I do hope to-morrow will be like to-day.”

It was, and yet how different!

The morrow dawned, still, beautiful, and clear, but it was now Hester’s turn to stay behind, nor participate in the joyous start.

She was not, indeed, slumbering, her ears having been the first to catch the earliest sound in the house—the pattering of footsteps along the passages, stopping at her sisters’ door. Then the two came into her room, half exultant, half commiserating, feeling her disappointment, but

still more sensible of their own good fortune. She was sitting up in bed waiting for them, very wide awake and miserable, but resolved that no one should know the half of what lay at the bottom of her heart. She sat up and eyed them over. Agatha, as usual, looked the best; she was in special good looks and good spirits, with so much superfluous good-humour, that she forebore to add more than the mildest infusion of "I told you so," to her condolences.

"You know, Hester, you can go another time, and I daresay Captain Cotterill will be here again before long. You *must* be tired too, after such a walk. And it would really have been rather hard on poor papa and mamma to have left them alone the whole day long."

Poor little Cinderella! I fear she did not feel all the dutiful pleasure she ought at being thus selected to solace them in their bereavement. I fear she raged in her despair and impotence. She had hardly been able to credit her hard fate on the previous night. It had been too terrible a sentence, too speedy a doom. Her mother, she thought, must relent; Bertie or Jem would intercede; her father would put

in a word ; something somehow—the last resort of the sanguine—would surely come to pass in her favour.

But Lady Manners, stern as Lady Macbeth on such a point, was inexorable.

She was seriously annoyed at what had happened, and like a wise woman, she said little, but acted. She did not make too much of a thoughtless prank, but she kept up her daughter's dignity, and at the same time inflicted a proper penance, by debarring her from joining in the next day's amusement.

“You chose to go in your own way, Hester, without leave from any one, and without so much as consulting your sisters. Had you said anything to them, they would have put the matter before you in its proper light, and you might now have gone happily all together. But I cannot allow any more of these wild, independent ways. You will stay at home, and that will show Constance also how much displeased I am.”

Constance had not succeeded in making “all straight,” as may thus be seen, and she had gone home somewhat smaller than she set out. “What a ridiculously strict woman Aunt Manners is,”

muttered she to herself. "She *was* angry. I had no idea she would have taken it up like that. Poor Hester! What a sermon she will get to-night! I am thankful I am not there to come in for a part. Although," she added, with a touch of humour, "I think I did not come off badly either. I think the edge of her wrath was blunted upon me. Upon my word, she can be disagreeable when she likes; I don't know anybody who has the gift of making herself more so. Even Agatha might take lessons."

But Constance having thus disposed of the matter, and joked about it at the dinner-table, was hardly prepared to see the carriage drive up the next morning without the little culprit.

"Oh, what a shame!" cried she. "Oh, Agatha, you need not make believe! I know as well as possible how it was! It really is too bad! I have a great mind to send over and fetch her."

"Fetch whom?" said Simon's voice behind. "Are you not all here?"

The same moment he saw who was missing, and even in that face, which never showed an emotion, there might have been seen the falling of a shadow by any one who had cared to look for it.

If people, however, are not looking for shadows they rarely find them; not one in a hundred has eyes to see what is printed in capital letters on his neighbour's brow.

Nobody was watching Colonel Lutteridge at the moment, and nobody saw his face fall. His voice could not have been less concerned than it was when he replied to Constance's "Hester is not come," by "Hester? Oh, is Hester not here?" as though scarcely even troubling himself to ask why. He did just inquire whether she had been overtired, but receiving a simple negative from the truthful Agatha, he said no more.

Agatha assured her sister afterwards, that since she had been afraid of its being known why she had stayed, she might set her mind at rest on that score, as no one had asked. Constance, of course, knew; but all that Constance had clamoured into their ears on their arrival had been for them alone; she had had too much *savoir faire* to make a remark on the subject afterwards. There had been a number of other ladies besides themselves, and since there were two from Wancote already, it was not likely that the absence of a third had been noticed.

It had been delightful. The day had been so much finer and warmer than the one before, that their cousin's idea of turning the expedition into a picnic had been quite successful. They had driven twelve miles through a fine open country, and had encamped by the side of a stream, and really if it had not been for the midges there would not have been a drawback to anything.

To her mother's investigations as to wet grass, and mists from the marshes, Agatha had nothing but satisfactory replies to give. They had had planks of newly-sawn wood, from a saw-mill close by, to sit upon; and rugs had been spread under their feet; and as for the mists, there were none rising till long after they had started on the homeward drive.

Captain Cotterill and Jane had stayed in the dogcart which had brought the provisions; it had been wheeled alongside of the luncheon-party, and Agatha smiled as she related that Constance had been evidently not a little put out at the best seat present not having been first offered to her. Coming home, she had had another disappointment: she had been prepared to drive the pair in the break, and Simon had stopped her.

A great deal was said about Simon, but Hester could not gather that he had said anything about her. It was for this her hungry heart was listening : for some kind slip of the tongue, some chance remark which should reveal she had been at least thought of. She had wearied through her day, keeping up as best she could the farce of indifference. She had driven with her mother, and had had the usual sort of luncheon, and had gone to see a few poor people after it, but unutterably tame and dull had seemed the routine, which so often had sufficed her well.

By five o'clock, however, things had brightened ; there was something to look to—something to wait for in the return of the carriage.

From Agatha she hardly expected more than she got. Jane's memory appeared to be warped, or centred on one object. She tried Jem.

"You had by far the best of it," said he. "We never saw an otter to-day. There was no fun at all ; everybody was taken up with the women—Cotterill as bad as the rest. As a picnic it was well enough ; but you never saw such a hunt in your life !"

He was the only discontented one of the set ;

but his repeated assurances that Hester had been better off at home did not go far towards making her think so. They were based solely on the fact of there having been no otter, and she cared not a jot whether such an animal existed or not.

Alone with Bertie, she ventured forth one other timid observation, to see what it would elicit.

“ You might have got my stick for me.”

“ Your stick ? ” said he. “ Well—if you had told me ; but I never heard a word about it. It was stupid of you not to bring it home yesterday ; I told you so. You will never see it again now.”

“ But Simon was to keep it for me.”

“ He will forget all about it. Look here, Hetty ; I am going to carve my name on this. It is an awfully good stick. Feel it. Just the sort of stick I like. As soon as I set my eyes upon it I knew it was the one for me, but I was afraid to seem too anxious, in case he wanted it for himself. Now that he has given it to me I shall have my name on it, though, or I should soon have somebody smuggling it off.”

There was nothing to be made of Bertie either.

CHAPTER X.

SIR JOHN DISCOURSES.

“A man’s nature is best perceived in privateness, for there is no affectation : in passion, for that putteth a man out of his precepts : and in a new case or experiment, for there custom leaveth him.”—BACON.

“It must have been a stupid sort of day !” said their father when he heard the accounts. “Just the sort of day I hate. What business had Constance there? I do think she might sometimes know to let people alone.”

It was suggested in vain, that the expedition having been specially got up and originated by Constance, she might perhaps find a better opportunity of letting people alone. He could not see it. Even his wife’s observation, that in her opinion her niece was quite enough, not to say a great deal too much, inclined to take the course he advocated, did not alter his mind.

“I know she plagues me wherever I go,” he

said. "I never can take a quiet walk along the road but I must have those ponies down upon me. Wherever we go out to dinner, she is sure to be sitting on the sofa—the first person I catch sight of in the room. And there she is in church——"

"My dear!"

"She is. Well, of course I am not saying she ought not to go, but why can't she sometimes go of an afternoon when I am not there? Why need she always make her way up to the very top of the pew, right in front of me? That pink bonnet gets into my eye, whichever way I look. I call it vulgar—a bonnet like that."

"Poor Constance! And such a pretty bonnet too!"

"Humph! Do you call it pretty? I see nothing pretty in it. But whatever she puts on it is always the same—you see it till you are sick of the sight of it. Then she comes running up behind you, if you are trying to get out of her way, and it's 'Sir Joh—n! Sir Joh—n!' at the top of her squeaking voice, so that there is no pretending that you don't hear. But what I dislike most of all about Constance is that nasty little laugh of hers. She will talk the

most egregious nonsense about things she knows nothing in the world about, and then laugh in a way that would make a saint swear. I think I gave her a settler yesterday, though. She began to me about this ridiculous otter-hunt—as if I did not know about otter-hunts before she was born! ‘Do come to my hunt. I can’t let you off coming to my hunt. Quite a ladies’ day, I assure you.’ A ladies’ day, indeed!” with a bitter sneer. “I just said—very shortly indeed, I can tell you—‘No, thank you; ladies’ days are not at all in my line.’ She will think twice before she holds out that sort of bait to me again.”

All was now plain.

He had never cared for otter-hunting, and to have his dislike attributed to the exertion it required, was hard on him, confident as he was that none of his physical powers were yet on the wane, but aware that few would probably credit so much.

He had exaggerated the inducement which Constance had held out as an olive branch, intending it solely for her aunt’s benefit, into a personal slight to his sportsmanship. The speaker had certainly been nervous, and not

being quite so much herself as usual at the moment, she had not made it sufficiently clear that she was addressing Lady Manners alone.

But after all, in spite of the injustice of the accusation in the present instance, those before whom it was made were too well aware that it mattered not a whit to Sir John what he had to go upon when he was in the humour to attack his niece, to consider it worth while to explain, or defend her.

“What a nuisance she must be to Simon!” proceeded he, presently.

“I think she is, rather.” Hester was the speaker; she was alone with her parents, engaged with her sketch-book.

“Eh?” said Sir John, pricking up his ears. It was a wet morning, and he had nothing to do; he had brought his paper to read in his wife’s sitting-room, and having come to an end of it, wished to talk.

“He is such a quiet man that I think she fidgets him.”

“She would fidget any man.”

“She makes so much of him,” continued the observant one of the family. “She puts him forward with such an air of holding back her-

self, whenever anything is said about the Manor. She never can let a thing pass."

"No. That's it," said her father, delighted. "Catch her let a thing pass! Do you hear that, Emily? Do you hear what Hester says? That was Constance to the life. She can never let a thing pass."

"She is certainly anything but well-mannered," said her aunt.

"Well-mannered? No. But what can you expect? She is not thorough-bred; it is the garron coming out in her."

"To make a joke of Hester's doing what she well knew I should disapprove—and you too; to come over here afterwards, and to try to laugh it off to my face! Really, I never was so ill-pleased with Constance in my life as I was on Wednesday."

"Ah! that touched *you* up. But after all, that was not so bad as inviting us to go ourselves because it was a——"

"I own I did wonder at Constance."

"Yes. I am sure *I* did."

"After seeing what I thought; and, indeed, she must have known before."

"Calling it a 'ladies' day'!"

“I thought her part in the affair the worst of any.”

“The worst? But no one else said a word?”

“Hester was to blame, but”—softening—
“Hester does not understand about such things, and she had Bertie’s sanction. Another time, however, Hetty, recollect that though he is your eldest brother, and though I certainly own you had some grounds for supposing he might judge for you—since he usually has a strong sense of propriety—still, you must consult your sisters should such an emergency ever again arise. Bertie has shown that he is not a safe guide in such matters. But as for Constance, she knew as well as any one : it was no ignorance on her part ; it was not that she did not know ; it was that she did not choose to care. Still, I can forgive her all the rest sooner than I can her coming over here, to beg Hester off, as she called it. As if my own child needed any ‘begging off’ by a stranger!”

“Mamma, she only meant to be kind.

“My dear, what was there kind in it? Am I such a terrible person that I need a mediator to come and propitiate me? Even if I am a tyrant——”

“Hut, Emily! who said you were a tyrant? I saw no harm in that part of the business. I suppose she thought Hetty would not speak up for herself. She does not know her, eh, Hetty? Well,” continued he, “three miles is something; but I wish we had six between us and the Manor. I should not object to sixteen. What do you say, Hester? Sixteen would take us out of the reach of the ponies, I take it.”

“Papa, how can you be so——”

“So what?”

“Unsociable; uncharitable. Why should you want to be out of the reach of everybody?”

“I don’t want to be out of the reach of everybody; but I should like amazingly to be out of the reach of Constance. You are not going to stand up for her, surely?”

“I do not see that she does us any harm.”

“Harm! Who talked about harm? People may be great pests without doing you any harm. I hope and trust Simon will not take to coming over so often; but he has more sense.”

“He has more to do, at least,” said Lady Manners. “If Constance could only be got to occupy herself a little more in indoor pursuits, she would be much improved. It is that per-

petual gadding from door to door that spoils what mind she has, frittering it away in gossip and idleness."

"Well, tell her so," said Sir John, deeply interested. "Just you tell her that, Emily, and see what she will say. It would do her a great deal of good—all the good in the world."

"She ought to be more with her little girl. There are a great many things that no mere nursery governess can teach, unless she happens to be a very exceptional one. I do not like Ellen being so entirely handed over to Miss Lane. Ellen is a delicate little thing, and I do not feel sure that Miss Lane understands her. I don't much care for Miss Lane; she appears to me to be too much engrossed in her own affairs. The child has not the attention she ought to have."

"Miss Lane is going away for a week on Monday," said Hester, who knew all the movements at Lutteridge. "Mamma, do let us have Ellen here, and let me look after her myself. I should like it so much," she continued, eagerly. "She would give no one any trouble—she is the best little creature in the world—and she could sleep in my room. May I, mamma?"

"Let me think a moment. Well, I don't see

any objection, Hetty. Poor little thing!" Lady Manners was devoted to children. "It is really a good idea. I should like myself to have her. The change would do her good, and she shall at least have wholesome food, and plenty of it."

This had long been a burden on her mind. She could never forget having once visited the child in her nursery when suffering from some infantile ailment, and seeing her turn away in disgust from the dinner which the mother, engrossed with visitors below, had thoughtlessly sent up. Everybody at Wancote soon knew the dinner—the only proper dinner—which Ellen should have had; it was something to have the chance of bestowing it now, though late, upon her.

Visions of strong chicken-broth, good brown beef-tea, mutton-chops, and rice-puddings, rose before her kindling maternal eye, and she fell into Hester's plan with alacrity.

"I will write myself. Not that Constance deserves it; but, however, that may pass. She will be more inclined to agree if the proposal comes from me."

Constance was only too happy to accept what she looked upon as an overture of reconciliation.

She did not suppose that Ellen's going or coming mattered very much to anybody; but there could be no objection. It pleased the child, and it was comfortable to feel that all was smooth again at Wancote. She wrote a grateful answer, and promised to bring the little visitor on Monday afternoon.

Saturday and Sunday passed without anything to mark them; and Monday morning opened with a fresh, blustering breeze, more like March than November.

The sisters were busy with their morning occupations, when, to their surprise, Constance in her pony-carriage, and without Ellen, drove past the window. Hester ran to take her to their mother, the others lingering to finish what they were doing ere they followed. She was not long in explaining what had happened, and what she wished next to happen. Ellen had caught a cold, or a chill, or something tiresome the night before; and though it was nothing to speak of,—nothing to interfere with Miss Lane's going away—in fact, she had just returned from seeing her to the station,—they had agreed that the child was not fit to go out on a visit.

“For my own part, I should have thought

she might have come perfectly well," confided Constance the next minute. "She could not be in a better house ; and in your hands, Aunt Manners, I should have known she would be well taken care of. I should have been quite easy about her. But Miss Lane impressed it on me—I believe she had not got the frocks and things ready, or something of that sort,—I daresay that was at the bottom of it ; but still the child certainly has a cough, and perhaps she is as well at home. So I thought I would look in on my way back, and see if you would allow Hester to come to us instead of Ellen's coming here? We are to be quite alone, and I promise"—with a twinkle of her eye—"to keep her as strictly under orders as you could wish, aunt."

It was not an out-of-the-way request ; indeed it was one so frequently made that unless any engagement actually stood in the way, permission could be reckoned on. Had it been otherwise—had there been anything new in the proposal—it may be questioned if Lady Manners's "Oh, certainly, my dear, if you wish it," would have come so readily. But Hester was often at Lutteridge, when Constance had no one

else at hand — nothing better wherewith to entertain herself. She was then in her best moods — more rational, more sensible than at other times ; and as the visits seemed to be spent in harmless occupations and amusements, no objection was ever offered to them.

Hester went thrice for once that either of her sisters did, partly because Constance liked her the best of the three, partly because she was willing to pass a good deal of her time with Ellen, so that the child would become a different creature under the genial influence,—would light up even at the sound of her cousin's name, and beg for her society, till the mother, who loved to be amused herself, and to be thought an indulgent parent at the same time, would make Ellen's desire the groundwork of nine invitations out of the ten.

Had Agatha been the one asked for, she would by no means have been so ready on the present occasion.

Had she had the slightest suspicion of the sudden thrill, the throb it sent through the veins of the quiet girl who stood by her side, she would have flung it from her, and trampled it under foot. But Hester's ready, cheerful

"Oh yes, I'll come if mamma likes," betrayed nothing. Lady Manners saw no objection, Constance saw no delight, and the thing was done. Ere her sisters had come in to see what was going on, half her trunk was packed.

She was directing her maid as to the remainder when Agatha came to her room.

"Mamma thinks, Hester, that it is a pity for you to go."

"Why a pity? Mamma gave me leave."

"The Forsters are coming to-morrow, you know, and the Browns and Parkers dine here to meet them."

"I know. But what are the Browns and the Parkers to me? They are not coming to see me; nor the Forsters neither. Gertrude is your friend."

"I don't think mamma cares for you to go all by yourself to Lutteridge."

"All by myself! What can you mean, Agatha? I have gone by myself to Lutteridge whenever I have been asked, ever since we have lived here. Mamma never minds our going there."

"It is different now," said Agatha, looking out of the window. The maid had left the room for a minute.

“How different? Did mamma tell you to come to me?”

“No. But she said she had forgotten the party to-morrow. She could not well say more before Constance; and I think she would like to speak to you about it.”

“What am I to do? Am I to go or not to go? I do wish mamma would not say one thing to you and another to me. However, I suppose I must go down.”

“I am to put in these two evening and this one morning dress, Miss?” said the maid, as the young ladies were leaving the room. “And shall you want a bonnet?”

“Oh no; I shall be back before Sunday at any rate,” said Hester, mournfully; “and I don’t know that I am going at all now. You had better wait here till I come up to tell you, Price.”

“I had better finish while I am about it, Miss Hester, and then it’s no matter taking out the things again; but if they have to be got ready in a hurry afterwards, there’s sure to be things forgotten.”

“Well,” acceded Hester; but she went downstairs with a hopeless step, unlike the one with

which she had flown up them ; afterwards, however, she blessed Price in her heart.

A number of people were in the drawing-room, and it took a minute to discover that the unusual amount of talking was due to the presence of the bride, Mrs Martin, who was the centre of the group.

Mrs Martin had felt herself quite stirred up by the delightful day she had had on Thursday, and had come to propose another picnic, which she and Mr Martin wished to have in the Barley Hill woods.

Of Mr and Mrs Martin much need not be said. They were an eminently amiable, respectable, worthy, and dull young couple, who lived in a small domain of their own, with a household of trim maids, a coachman, a gardener, and a boy between the two to do the dirty work of each. They were greatly taken up with each other, but it is to be feared outsiders found them uninteresting. It is not, you know, of vital importance to you what hours your friend's husband has always been accustomed to keep, nor the exact amount of exercise your friend herself finds she can take without being over-fatigued. These matters

were samples of Mrs Martin's style of conversation. Unless she was gossiping, she prosed ; and to do her justice, she prosed oftener than she gossiped. She was more concerned in her own affairs than she was in those of her neighbours.

But, after a fashion, Mrs Martin liked society too.

To sit up by her husband's side in their little phaeton, nicely dressed, with her card-case in her hand, and a round of morning calls before her, was her sum-total of earthly bliss. Dinner-parties were likewise to her taste, provided only that they were long enough, stiff enough, and stupid enough. At her own house she aped these to the best of her powers. Two had been already given, and, for a young couple but four months married, nothing could have been more creditable. The soup was eatable in spite of its pepper, and only the ducklings were so raw that they could not be cut on both sides.

She was now fired with a desire to emulate the impromptu picnic of the week before.

But this, Lady Manners thought, was carryings things too far : she had dined at Mr Martin's pretty cottage, and considered that in so

doing she had fulfilled all that could possibly be required of her ; she did think that it was not for such very young married people to be taking the lead in further entertainments. To tell the truth, an invitation from them at all had rather taken her by surprise : she had felt that she would be glad to see them both occasionally at Wancote, without any need for such hospitality being returned ; and it was not without an inward protest that she had brought herself to bring Sir John on the above-named occasion.

A frolic on the part of Colonel Lutteridge and his sister was all well enough, but to have it taken up and imitated by Mr and Mrs Martin was really—really—— ! She drew herself up, and showed her “ reallys ” in her face.

The bride, who had come full of confidence, was not, however, to be easily daunted.

“ We did enjoy ourselves so much,” she said, with a pretty look at Mrs Robert Lutteridge, “ that we thought everybody must have done the same. And it was my husband’s idea. He said, ‘ Why should we not have a day in Barley Hill woods ? ’ So then I ordered the phaeton, and came off at once.”

“ Very kind,” murmured Lady Manners.

“But it is hardly the time of year — the woods are very damp.”

“Oh, I assure you, we did so well on Thursday. Did we not, Mrs Lutteridge? None of us got in the least wet; and we could take plenty of rugs, and our waterproofs, and the carriage macintosh—we could manage perfectly, I am sure.”

“I am afraid we must not make an engagement. We have guests coming to us tomorrow.”

“Do bring them with you. Bring any one you like. We shall be delighted. Because, you know, it is not like an indoor thing—one has not to think about the room; and it does not matter about the day, for any day will suit us. If you will fix it,” meaning to be especially polite, “then we can ask the other people. And our housekeeper will have the provisions ready; she only wants to know a day or two beforehand.”

“Housekeeper!” muttered Lady Manners, who had tasted the very ordinary dinner of a very ordinary cook. She had tried to think well of Mrs Martin, but that “housekeeper” undid all.

“Summer is the time for expeditions,” she said, decidedly.

“And you will really not come? I don’t know what I shall say to Furnival. I answered for you, and he will be so disappointed. We had arranged to have the fly from the turnpike, besides our own phaeton; I spoke to the man about it as I came through; I wanted to be sure that we could have the horse. And now——” She stopped disconsolately.

But pity was absent from the breasts of those around. Even Hetty, preoccupied with her own concerns, forgot them for the moment to smile; and Jem, when told afterwards of what the arrangement was to have been, exclaimed, “The horse with the wall eye! Lor’!”

Lady Manners was so taken up by her indignation, and her desire to restrain it within the bounds of moderation—between her feeling that the offender ought to be put down, and yet not utterly crushed—that Mrs Martin was paramount in her thoughts. She did not wish to say anything which in a calmer hour she would wish unsaid; at the same time she did not care to wait for any of the numerous smart replies which Sir John would be sure to coin for her when he

came to hear they had been required—any one of which, he would aver, she might have thought of at the time, if she had only had her wits about her.

Between letting Mrs Martin down gently, and making sure that she understood that her ways were not the ways of the Lutterridges and the Manners', she scarcely understood what Hester meant when at length Constance rose to go, and her wishes on the question of the proposed visit were consulted anew.

"Yes, my love," she said, rather bewildered. "I gave you leave. I thought you understood so."

"Agatha told me you had forgotten the party to-morrow, mamma."

"The party? Oh, I don't think you care much for dinner-parties, Hetty. Never mind the party, my dear."

"You are sure you don't mind my going, mamma?"

"Oh no, no; not for this once. Don't want to go often, and don't stay beyond Saturday, little one."

CHAPTER XI.

CONSTANCE IS LISTENED TO.

“Discretion of speech is more than eloquence ; and to speak agreeably to him with whom we have to deal, is more than to speak in good words, or in good order.”—BACON.

SATURDAY ! She had only thought of Thursday—Friday at the very outside. It was almost incredible that she had caught the word aright : that she should be coming at all was wonderful—that she should see her little black box carried out to the carriage was delightful—but that she should have been given permission to remain till Saturday was too much to believe !

“How long am I to stay, Constance ?”

“Only till Saturday. You are not to stay over Sunday, because of your school-children, I believe. I asked for you till this day week, but I did not expect to have you. People always like to cut a slice off a petition before they say

‘yes,’ you know. Had I suggested Saturday, you would have had to go on Thursday.”

“I never thought I should be allowed to stay beyond Thursday.”

“By the way, do you like to stay? I never thought of asking you that. We have no otter hunts going on now, and not a single thing on hand for this week, except the concert at Seeley on Friday: that we have promised to go to, because our choir is to be part of the orchestra. There are to be no very great people, but there will be some lesser lights; and Lord Westmacott is coming to dine and sleep here, as he is alone at the Castle, and he is obliged to be present at the concert, at any rate. Are any of you going?”

“No. We had not heard of it; at least I had not.”

“Just as well,” pondered Constance. “And just as well, too, that I held my tongue. Simon ought to go, as Lord Westmacott goes, so I shall not want any more of the Manners party.”

She and Hester were not sorry to get indoors.

The wind blew in their faces, and in spite of wraps, they could not get warm. Luncheon was more efficacious, but the afternoon was not

tempting for further outdoor projects, and Hester was well pleased to get Ellen down and play with her beside the fire, while Constance lounged over her fancy-work, and warmed her feet on the fender.

Neither of them expected to see Simon till dinner-time, but soon after five o'clock he came in, having got wet through, and been obliged to change his clothes for the evening. It was growing dusk, so it did not signify : he looked his best, Hester thought.

He did not manifest any particular surprise or pleasure at the sight of her ; he gave her his polite, Agatha-like reception, asked if it had rained when they were out, and took Ellen on his knee. Nor did his cousin expect anything beyond this ; she replied with becoming reserve, and took her seat on Constance's sofa.

Half an hour passed quietly, at the expiration of which a servant entered, announcing that a person—he would not commit himself further—a person from Seeley had come, by appointment, to see Mrs Robert Lutteridge.

“A person !” said Constance. “Who ?”

“I think he is a blind person, ma'am.”

“Oh—my blind boy. Oh !” a pause. “Dear

me ! ” cried she. “ I wish he had come at any other time : I did tell him to-day would do, but I had forgotten about it altogether. Could he not wait till after dinner—no, for the carrier is to drive him back—I know, I remember ; he must be shown into the music-room, John. Give him something to eat, and let me know as soon as he has had it.”

“ What now, Constance ? ” said Simon.

“ The blind boy in our choir—Malachi Tonkin is his name.”

“ Malachi Tonkin ! ”

“ Yes ; funny, isn’t it ? But you know him, for you noticed his voice once. I have undertaken to put him through his facings for the concert on Friday. Oh, is he ready so soon ? ” as the footman re-entered. “ Won’t he have anything ? Well, I’ll come. Have you taken in lights ? I must go, I suppose,” with a sigh, as the last pretext for lingering was cut from beneath her feet. Lights had been already put in the room, and the boy was there awaiting her.

Scarcely had the first notes sounded through the folding-doors—for the music-room opened out of the little chamber in which the rest of the

party were gathered—than Colonel Lutteridge rose, put Ellen down, and walked across the rug to the vacant place on the sofa.

“Hester,” he said, “do you know who sent for you to come to-day? It was I. Nobody knows that—not even Constance; but with me rests the sole credit of the performance, notwithstanding. The idea was communicated from me to her, and from her to Ellen, and from Ellen to Wancote. I thought you had been in the corner long enough. Poor little girl! It was rather a big punishment for playing truant once in a way. Tell me, Hester, did you think a great deal about us the other day?”

“Oh, a great deal—a great deal; I knew Mr and Mrs Martin were going, and the girls from Wet Cliff, and a number of other nice people. I did envy you; I did wish to be with you.”

“You would rather have gone out on the second day than on the first?”

“The second was the ladies’ day, you know.”

“Very true. You would have had a pleasant drive and a great deal of amusement. You would have had a nice corner of the large barouche beside Agatha and Mrs Martin. Mrs Martin looked very pretty in her hat; so did Agatha.

I never saw Agatha look better. Thursday was a much finer day than Wednesday, Hester."

"Was it? I don't think it was. Not very much finer. Wednesday was fine enough."

"Oh no, it did not turn out nearly so well as we thought it would. Have you forgotten that long shower when we were in the old cottage?"

"No."

"There were no showers on Thursday."

"Well?"

"And there was no Hester on Thursday. Somehow I liked Wednesday best."

The blind boy's voice came rich and sweet through the half-closed doors, in the pause that followed. Little Ellen, attracted by the sound, ran off to listen, and the wood-fire blazed up and fell, emitting a flickering light that danced up and down over the old furniture, and into the wainscoted windows of the room cheerily.

"This reminds me," said Simon, presently, "of that first evening when Bertie brought me to your house after shooting, and I found an elf crouching in the corner, so shy and frightened that she could hardly lift up her voice to weep, much less her eyes to find the missing tea-cups."

“I was not more frightened than other people would have been.”

“What people?”

“All of us. I think the rest of those at home are more afraid of you than I am. They think you are——”

“Clever, eh?”

She blushed crimson.

“Never mind,” said Simon, laughing, “I am not going to tease you more than I can help to-night, Hester. You can stand a little, can’t you? It is so nice having you here. By the way, what will Jem do without you for a whole week? He must not come over; I want you all to myself. Will he be very forlorn?”

“No indeed! Perhaps he may, though. He does not know I am gone yet—I mean, he did not when I came. I daresay he will miss me a little.”

“Would he have tried to stop you?”

“Jem! Oh!”

“Pray, what may that ‘Oh’ mean?”

“You don’t know Jem if you can think such a thing. If I had had any difficulty in coming, he would have been the one I would have gone to to help me, if I could have got at him. He

would have been the one to speak to mamma for me; he would not have minded a pin's point about himself, so long as I got what I wanted. Nobody knows Jem—nobody understands him."

"I like Jem."

"Jem!" Hester lifted her head, and her eyes dilated as she turned them towards her cousin—"Jem is the best, and the nicest, and the—the—the—worth a dozen Berties," the panegyric broke off short. "None of the others love him as I do, unless it is mamma. But the rest think—I mean they see—they just see what they see in Jem—do you know what I mean?"

"Not quite."

"It is often not the least what he feels, or what he wants, that Jem shows; and no one takes the trouble to find that out; and it does make me so angry sometimes, the way that Bertie behaves to him——" She stopped, with revelations on the tip of her tongue.

Simon was regarding her steadily, with his elbow resting on the back of the sofa, his head on his hand.

"Hester," he said, "you see this is very interesting. I like to hear about them all when

you are sure you are telling me nothing that they would mind your saying, but—do you understand—one forgets a little, and things creep out that you neither mean to reveal nor I to listen to. See here, I have something else to talk about. None of you ever call me by my name. I suspected as much before, but now I am certain of it. Why don't you ?”

“I am not sure. We did not think we ought.”

“Because I am too old ?”

Because he was too old ? Surely not. Looking at the questioner it seemed an impossible solution. Nor was he now to them a stranger. They were a homely, easy, old-fashioned family, who had instantly admitted their kinsman to all the privileges he chose to claim.

In Simon himself lay the difficulty. Had he been a “Hail-fellow-well-met” sort of cousin, or an easy, slouching, good-natured cousin, or a dapper little cousin, or even a sober, middle-aged cousin, it might by this time have been got over by one and all.

But there was a barrier, or at least a something in Colonel Lutteridge which made any attempt upon his Christian name seem like rid-

ing at a fence in the dark : it might be cleared safely, but the chances were equal the other way.

“No, you are not too old,” said Hester, smiling, “but you are too—grave.”

“Grave !”

“Yes. And perhaps a little stiff—a little awful,” she added, archly deprecating his resentment by peeping from under her eyelids as the words dropped out.

But to her surprise he replied with a seriousness and gentleness at variance with the scene.

“I can’t help it, Hester. Do you know I would give anything in the world to shake off that absurd manner? It quite drags me down as I go on through life. You don’t know how I envy fellows,” he went on, earnestly, “when I see them chattering away quite at their ease, and see how much more pleasant it is for everybody to be with them than with me. When I speak to people I only make a fool of myself. If you knew how I hate my own pompous talk, and how I rack my brain to think of things to say !”

“Not with me.”

“No ; not with you. So you have found that

out too, you little witch? I was just coming to that part; I can talk to you, Hester, like a rational being, and you don't mind a little nonsense either. That is to say, you are neither a child nor a — contemporary. We suit each other exactly. But there is not one person in a thousand with whom I can get on as well; and it is certainly my own fault. I know it," he added, with an evident sincerity and humility that showed her it would be useless to affect any pretence of believing the contrary. "I am perfectly well aware of my deficiencies, but I am hopeless now of overcoming them. I don't know why I speak about myself either, except that it is a relief, just once in a way; and I thought that it was barely possible you would give me a grain — a crumb of the sympathy you bestow so abundantly on Jem."

"Oh!" said Hester, with a little smile. "You do wonderfully well. If you were only Jem, you know, or me, it might not be taken to mean so much; but they all think that whatever you say must be good. I heard mamma this morning declare that she really did not know what you would have thought of something or other; and papa holds you over the boys' heads——"

“Ha, ha, ha !” Simon leaned back on the sofa and laughed outright.

Then he resumed, laying his head again on his hand, and gazing into her face thoughtfully. “You would not have told me that if you had not seen it was a farce ? I hope you don’t shed the rays of your intelligence on all around, though ? I hope you are not a cruel little thing even to such an idiot as I ?”

“No, indeed.”

“I am an idiot, am I ?”

“You can call yourself so if you like.”

“Constance thinks me a profound philosopher,” he said ; “and all the others respect me more or less, except this chit of a girl, and she thinks nothing of me at all ! Well, chit,” added he, rising up, “it is time for you to go to dress. I hear Constance ushering forth her victim, so it is meet that I should release mine. We shall have other opportunities of renewing this vexed question.”

When Constance came in she found Simon alone, sunk in reverie.

Where was Hester ? Gone up-stairs. Ellen ? He did not know ; probably gone up-stairs too.

He had then to hear about the blind boy,

how well he had done, and how much was predicted of him. Constance thought his voice even better than she had expected it to be. It might, to be sure, have been the room—Agatha always liked to sing in that room—but even, making all allowances, she was charmed with the performance, and with herself for the part she had taken in it.

“Sometimes we sit there in the evenings, when we have musical people here,” observed Constance, further. “Agatha always begs for an adjournment; but I am not such a devotee, and, to own the truth, I do not care to go out of my way for any reward Agatha’s songs are likely to give. I had rather hear Hetty singing hymns to Ellen a great deal. Hetty does not set up to sing, but she has a nice clear little pipe, and makes no pretence.”

“Ah!” said Simon. “I thought Agatha was a great musician,” he added, after a little.

“What do you think yourself? You have heard her?”

“I am no judge.”

“Neither am I; but I know good from bad. Really that blind Malachi’s voice rings in my ears.”

“Yes. I liked it. We heard it in here as loud and sweet as a blackbird’s. But then you know that is not the way young ladies sing.”

“Would it were!” with a mock sigh, and a sharp glance at him.

“There was a fellow in our regiment,” he continued, absently—“I never heard a fellow sing like him. He used to go at it for hours, and be as fresh at the end as he was at the beginning. We set him up to sing every night.”

“Indeed!”

“That was the way to hear music. Just to sit in your chair and listen, without having to say anything. All the pleasure of hearing is taken away when you have to force out a compliment at the end of every song.”

“Just what I think. We will make Hetty give us some of her little ballads to-night—they are really very nice; and you and I will sit in the great chairs by the fire, and tell her to go on till further orders.”

“And some hymns to end with?”

“She won’t sing those unless Ellen is by. But what do you say? Shall it be as I have said? Shall we inhabit the music-room to-night? It must be warmed first if we do.”

He made no objection, and the order was given; but both Constance and Hester sang long for their own edification alone.

“What a Goth he is!” cried the former as ten o’clock struck. “He always stays in the dining-room half the evening, and what he does there I cannot imagine, for he takes very little wine. You must not be affronted, Hester; it is no special disrespect to you; he always does it. Ah! here he is at last,” she exclaimed, as the door opened to admit her brother-in-law; “and though it is at last, Simon, still it is better late than never. Now what have you to say to Hester for treating her in this way?”

“Only this, that I would have come before, if I could.”

“Explain.”

“Lewis has been with me ever since you went.”

“Too bad of him. Why could he not have left you in peace till to-morrow morning?”

“He is obliged to go to town to-morrow morning. Well, Hester,” turning to her, “Constance has bespoken you for our evening’s entertainment. She has promised that you will sing for

us straight on, till you are told to stop, without expecting either money or thanks."

"Yes," subjoined Constance, comfortably settling down opposite him, as he drew one large chair forward to the side of the fire, "I answered for you, Hetty. Now begin."

The singing was not much, but it was all that it had been called: it was natural, unaffected, and tuneful; not worth moving out of one's way to hear, but pleasant when brought to one's own door.

At the close, Simon surprised the other two. He had been lying back in his chair, looking up into the dim, half-lit ceiling, with his arms folded and feet stretched out. So silent, and so motionless, that from time to time he was looked at to be sure whether he was awake or slumbering; but when the piano was closed, and his cousin drew near the fire, he turned his head and addressed her. "Thank you, Hester," he said, emphatically. "This," he added, "has been the pleasantest evening I have spent since I came home."

Constance's noisy laugh brought a flush to the singer's cheek. "Now, Simon," cried the gay lady, "you who bargained you were to

pay no compliments, what do you call that? Hester may well be proud of such a tribute. And you were really not asleep either. I know he was not, Hetty, for I kept watch and ward all the time."

"Did you notice him?" she whispered afterwards. "Did you see what he was like, as he lay back in his chair, with his eyes half shut and his arms folded? It was the dead Napoleon—Delaroche's picture. I have seen Simon often look like that. By the way, you little creature, it was you who first told me of it. Well, never mind—I'm sure you never can have seen him look half so like before; for it is only when he is alone with me, and at rest, that that look comes over his face."

Now why should Hester turn away from such a speech in disgust? Why should her cousin Constance all at once become distasteful to her in a variety of ways?

Within the next few days the young girl seemed to make a leap forward in discoveries which at another time might have been the work of years. She understood, as if by magic, motives and springs of action that would have been overlooked but a week or two before—

things which had puzzled her, and made her frequently in her secret heart call her mother uncharitable. For Lady Manners, not desirous of enlightening too much, had often felt herself obliged to condemn vaguely ; and when pressed by the vigorous young ones for reasons, had known that those which she alone cared to give were unsatisfactory. She did not like to say to her young daughters, “ Your cousin is a shallow, petty-minded, unprincipled woman ; ” she preferred such phrases as “ Constance is not all that I could wish,” or “ I should be sorry to see you grow up like Constance,” and left them to make further conclusions themselves. She would not permit unrestrained intimacy, but the claims of relationship were strong, and she could not but allow that it might be her duty to give countenance to a young widow, beautiful and high-spirited, who was living within a few miles of their own door, and who, with the exception of herself, had absolutely no one either to restrain or to support her.

Neither Agatha nor Jane betrayed their mother’s confidence ; they were good friends with their cousin, but were not influenced by her. For Agatha, Constance had never professed

much affection, and with Jane she had still less in common; Jane, she said, was too saintly for anything. But she took an early fancy to Hester, who was funny and clever, and not particularly good-looking: she liked to single Hetty out, and make much of her, while she was yet only a little roundabout school-girl, and had been wont to insist upon it that the youngest of the sisters was the "favourite," who would win in the long-run.

Not that she thought it, but she thought that it teased Agatha to have it said. She began to be rather astonished herself when ripening years not only moulded the youthful form into better shape, but softened the complexion, and re-touched every feature. Hester now began to be called "pretty,"—to be admired, not only talked to; and although Constance's prognostications were not likely ever to be fulfilled, they were so much nearer being so than they had formerly been, that she ceased to make them.

But if she was surprised, she was not on the whole displeased. She had no jealousy of the younger ones, such as made her enjoy a secret cut at the eldest. In Hester's countenance there

never was, and never would be, any of that calm superiority which fretted Constance, and which made her feel that she was looked upon by Agatha as frivolous, if not absolutely untutored. She suspected herself disapproved even by the gentle Jane ; but there was a breadth of vision, a lurking *diablerie*, about Hester, which made her cousin easy about her opinion.

“ I don’t understand that child,” she said once to Simon. It was on the Sunday evening previous to her inviting Hester to Lutteridge. “ She is a puzzle to me. She has been nowhere, and seen nobody ; but while her sisters are the veriest prudes—regular old maids—Hester is a woman of the world.”

“ Well ? ” said Simon, with interest. “ How do you account for it ? ”

“ She is clever, you know, but that is not all. She is original ; she is daring ; she is not to be put down and cut and trimmed, and made to think just what everybody thinks, and do just what everybody does. I liked her running off here with the boys that morning. How she must have enjoyed it ! For you see, Simon, those girls are as entirely under orders as any of the men in your regiment. It is nonsense to

talk of the freedom and independence of English girls of a certain rank. The good old-fashioned fathers and mothers never loosen their grip till they hand over the daughter to her husband; and neither do the fashionable people, though for a different reason. Hester may think for herself as much as she likes, but she won't act for herself again in a hurry."

"Bertie and Jem were on her side, you know."

"Jem's consternation when he found himself implicated in the sinful deed was delightful. He was as innocent as a baby of all the machinations. If he had suspected what Bertie very well knew—that he was bringing Hester to grief with her mother—we should never have had her here. He thought she was only giving Agatha the slip."

"And he would have put her off?"

"He can do anything with her; and, upon my word, I don't wonder at her fondness for him. He is worth all the rest of the family put together. But, you know, he is not bright; he is, if anything, rather below par. Bertie is supposed to have the brains; but I don't think Bertie's are in any way remarkable—do you?"

"How comes it," said Simon, pursuing his

own thoughts, "that Jem should have the influence you say he has with Hester, when she has so much the better head of the two?"

"Oh," said Constance, with a passing tribute of sincerity, "Jem is a wonderfully good boy. I don't wish to say a word against him. I quite agree with Hester; he is—let me see, I think the word I want is, *honest*. Jem, in a world of shams, is actually and absolutely honest. There now, is that not something to say?"

"Go on. I want to hear more."

"If you ask for his opinion, he tells you straight off what he really thinks, without stopping, as you know we all do a little, whether consciously or unconsciously, to consider if we shall say it or not. If he offers to give up a thing, he means to do as he says—not to be prevented and reasoned with, and given credit for unselfishness, while all the time nothing has been done to deserve it. And then the presents he gives! I don't suppose he ever buys a thing for himself! And all the time he is so natural, and foolish, and shabby, and happy, that he is not the least one's ideal of a religious youth."

"You are good at descriptions, Constance."

"Oh," said she, elated at praise seldom be-

stowed, as well as at a degree of interest her conversation did not often elicit, "I had a good subject in Jem. Ask me about Bertie and I should have nothing to say."

Accordingly he did not ask.

"He is the ordinary, commonplace, good-looking young man," she went on, however. "He thinks an immense deal of himself, and is to the full as great a prig as either of his sisters. I cannot understand his bringing Hester here on Wednesday, unless it was to spite Agatha. He is jealous of her rival authority in the family. He wanted to please you too, I daresay."

"Why to please me?"

"You are a great man to him. He never neglects a chance of gaining favour with great people."

"You are severe, but I agree with you in your estimates. I don't much care for Bertie, and I like Jem. I like Hester too. Since you say Ellen is not to go there to-morrow, let Hester come here."

"Or one of the others?"

"Why one of the others? The child would rather have Hester."

"So she would. Agatha certainly would not

play with her, and Jane is not amusing—not the one to stir her up and make her bright and lively.”

“No. Not the one.”

“I shall not ask either of them, then. I shall confine my invitation to Hester.”

“I should.”

And thus, as he afterwards averred, the proposal had actually emanated in the first instance from him.

CHAPTER XII.

“’TIS ILL PLAYING WITH EDGE-TOOLS.”

“Hearts are not flint, and flints are rent ;
Hearts are not steel, and steel is bent.”

—SCOTT.

HESTER’S eyes would have been opened long before with regard to Constance had she not been blinded on the subject by the constant partiality shown and, as we have seen, sincerely felt for her by her cousin. It is hardly to be wondered at that a girl not yet eighteen, who, as Constance herself said, had been nowhere and seen nobody, should have been unconsciously bound and bewildered by this. She was not duped to any extent, did not vow a life-long devotion in return for caresses ; but much that would not have been tolerated in another was endurable in Constance.

But if a charitable veil had hitherto been cast

over all defects at the Manor, everything connected with it was now seen through a glamour—a roseate mist.

True, Constance had never appeared to less advantage, but what was Constance to Hester when Simon was by?

He was a good deal at home during her stay—not often visible, it is true, not giving them his company for long at a time, but surprising them by appearances at odd hours, by coming straight indoors direct to the sitting-room after riding or shooting, and by lingering after meals, instead of cutting them short, as Constance told Hester was his habit.

“Neither of us care to sit long at table,” she said.

But Hester could not help noticing that the move was made again and again by her ere he took it up. He was by no means so unsociable as she made out, and there was but one inference to be drawn—the society of his sister-in-law was not what he cared for.

Coming upon him one day in the hall, she applied for her stick. It was not hers, she was told; she had forfeited all claim to it, and it was only to be regained by taking another walk—a

walk of at least five miles in length—with him and Jem, in memory of their first expedition, and in expiation of their confessed shortcomings on the occasion. Various other small articles, however—pretty ivory and sandal-wood toys—found their way to her room up-stairs, and were treasured for more than their intrinsic value. In spite of its being “dull November,” there were rides and drives, and pleasant evenings in the music-room, —and altogether the time passed only too quickly.

Ellen’s “Only two days more of Hester,” and at last, her “Only one day more of Hester,” was mournfully echoed in Hester’s own bosom.

Never mind; she was not going to spoil that one day at least.

After all, even when she should have to leave dear delightful Lutteridge, she was but going three miles off,—was but removed by one mile when the river could be crossed; and at any time she could come over, or they (Simon and Constance were bracketed even in her inward communings at this time) could come to Wancote. Of course she had enjoyed her visit—she had been very happy, she frankly owned, and would certainly come again whenever she was

wanted; and then she ran up-stairs singing. “Is she not a jolly little thing?” said Constance. “I wish Aunt Manners were not such a disciplinarian, and I would keep Hester another week.”

“Can you not?”

She shook her head.

This was on Friday, the day of the concert, and also the day when the Quarter-Sessions took Colonel Lutteridge away immediately after breakfast, not to return till late in the afternoon.

Constance and Hester busied themselves after lunch in the old schoolroom—a long low apartment down in the bowels of the house, cut off from the more inhabited portion by an interminable passage, out of which opened the billiard-room, the smoking-room, the butler’s sanctum, and chambers of that kind.

The schoolroom, thus inconveniently situated in some respects, was, however, for one purpose, the best place in the world. It opened by a large glass door into the conservatory—having been originally intended for the drawing-room, until a more commodious saloon was built in the new wing of the house—and, accordingly, when

arrangements of flowers were wanted, nothing was more handy than to have the vases and glasses carried in there, and trim them, as it were, upon the spot on which they were gathered.

The afternoon was fine, and the two ladies, with scissors in their hands, exacted unsparing tribute, not only from the plants under cover, but from such as had not suffered from the autumnal rain and wind without. They were themselves surprised at the goodly array they were able to muster, when at length the final round had been made, and, ferns and leaves having been added from the stove, they proceeded to deck the glasses. These were to be numerous.

Constance had been not a little gratified by the prospective addition of Lord Westmacott to her party for the evening. He was the principal person of importance in the next district, not near enough to overshadow the Lutteridges or the Manners', yet sufficiently close to make it agreeable and desirable that the terms of intimacy they were upon with each other should be exhibited in public. He was also a guest whom everybody liked to have, irrespective of the honour bestowed by his presence ; a stout, talk-

ative, unaffected, and amiable peer, not much of a sportsman, and still less of a scholar. And then he was a professed admirer of Mrs Robert Lutteridge, with whom he danced a great deal at county balls, and who had always her smile and her jest ready for him. When he was at her right hand he did not, like Sir John, complain of her talking. He thought her remarkably talented and agreeable, and finding that he could amuse so fine a woman, invariably put him into the best humour possible, both with her and himself.

Being *en garçon* at the Castle, he accepted the invitation to Lutteridge with alacrity. It was shockingly dull, he wrote—the country was positively unendurable in wet weather, and it was only too kind of Mrs Lutteridge to take pity on a lonely man. He must have gone to the concert at any rate, but her charming proposal had converted the penance into a pleasure.

Since he was thus coming prepared for enjoyment, she took care that nothing should be wanting which could even in the smallest measure contribute to it. She ordered a dinner of dainties, roaring fires in all the rooms, the large close carriage for the drive, and a nice little

supper to be ready for them on their return. Dine they must at the unearthly hour of six, and as they could not be expected home until after ten, they would certainly want supper. After all, just for once, such an odd jumble of meals was not disagreeable. There is nothing to do in the country after dark, and it is dark by six in November. Constance only hoped that Lord Westmacott would mind the arrangement as little as she did.

He was expected in time to dress and no more—would return with Simon, since both were attending the Sessions ; and accordingly, at four o'clock the fair flower-gatherers, having collected their materials, set to work with a clear hour and a half before them.

They were in frisky and volatile spirits. Hester snatched from Constance the large blossom designed for the centre - piece, and Constance snatched it back. Hester spilt the water—Constance broke a glass. At each misfortune they only laughed.

All their prattle ran on the evening before them.

“Lord Westmacott sits in front with me,” said Constance. “I must tell you, Hetty, that

our four seats are all together—two in front and two behind. You and Simon will take the two behind; because, you see, Lord Westmacott ought to be seen. I think the Lys Castle people will be rather astonished to see Lord Westmacott with us! I daresay they will not expect that. And we have always such fun together.”

“Yes; I daresay. If you laugh too much I shall give you a pinch, or a prick with this pin.”

“Hester! You really—you must take care, you know! If you were to do anything of that sort it would be dreadful! Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, I shall take very good care. I shall choose my own time. In the middle of Madame—what’s her name? Gigglesini’s finest wriggle-ando I shall just pull that little curl on your neck.”

“Oh, if you dare!” cried Constance, not in the least alarmed. “Oh, you wicked child! But I know you would not dare. Imagine Lord Westmacott’s feelings!”

“Lord Westmacott’s feelings!”

“Simon, then. What would he think?”

“Simon?” Hester was on her guard in a moment. “Ho! who cares what he thinks?”

“Don’t be so contemptuous. I care a great deal.”

“Do you, indeed?”

“He would be horrified.”

“Delightful! Let us horrify him.”

“You are a mischievous monkey. Hester, if you don’t behave properly I shall tell Agatha, and all the rest of them; I won’t have poor dear Simon vexed.”

“Poor dear Simon!” cried Hester, mimicking. “Poor dear cockatoo! Look here, Constance, I’ll show you exactly what he would look like,” letting fall her scissors, folding her arms, and dropping her head on one side. “Now, look—stop that for a moment, and listen. ‘Constance, I am shocked at the behaviour of that child. I don’t know much about such things, but all the girls that I have ever had to do with have known how to conduct themselves in public. I am really—hum—ah—distressed at such an exhibition; it has annoyed me beyond measure.’ Then down go the corners of his mouth—no more to be got out of *them*—up goes the chin—back as straight as a board. Behold ‘poor dear Simon’ to the life!”

“Yes,” said a gentle voice from the conservatory. “Yes, Hester—to the life!”

He stood there to verify the portrait, in the very attitude she had assumed ; how long he had preserved it was unknown.

Possibly but a minute. That last phrase, then, had revealed to him the meaning of all that had preceded it. Had his own name not been distinctly caught he might never have known of whom she had been speaking—he might not have discovered that any one was being represented—might have supposed anything but the truth.

But vain now was it to wish the words unspoken.

She had been caught in the act, drawn up to her full height, with pursed lips and crossed arms, and the next moment had been audibly uttered, “Behold poor dear Simon to the life!”

One scarlet cheek was turned towards him, and like a flash Hester had gone.

Constance shrieked with laughter. “Oh dear ! How amusing ! How very good ! And you were there all the time, you cruel man ? Well, you know, there is but one thing to be said—the old consolation—‘Listeners never hear any good of themselves.’ ”

He came into the room.

“Was it not well done?” continued Constance, doing honestly her best for the culprit. “Did she not look an engaging little soul, making that funny little face to imitate yours? You must not be offended with her, Simon. It was all in the merest joke. We were laughing together, she and I, over Lord Westmacott and all sorts of people, and I told her that if she ran wild and did not behave properly at the concert to-night that I did not know what you and Lord Westmacott would think. Then we began laughing about Lord Westmacott.”

“And imitating him.”

“Yes; I daresay we did. Hester can, I know. I have often see her take him off admirably.”

“But to-day I was the favoured one?”

“Oh, don’t be stupid about it,” said she, trying to coax. “Dear Simon, the child meant no harm. She is as full of tricks as a monkey. No one ever minds what Hester does. It was merely because I held you up as a bugbear that she turned round upon me, to show that she was not to be overawed.”

“I think she ought to apologise.”

“Well, of course. That is, if you wish it. But you must not look at her in that horribly

stern, severe way. She is sorry enough by this time, I am sure. I daresay she is in a great state of mind. And she has left me to do all these flowers, too! Silly child! what good did it do to run away?”

He said nothing, and she ran on. “May I not tell Hester that you will forgive and forget, Simon? You don’t want to take the spirit out of her, and spoil her last evening, do you?”

“I think she ought to beg my pardon.”

“But—well—you see it is rather awkward. She is a grown-up young lady, though we have not come to realise it yet—it is hardly pleasant, hardly the thing—but to be sure you are cousins; you must manage it your own way. Suppose I tell her that I have interceded on her behalf, and that you will not think any more about it?”

“By no means; that will not do.”

“It will make us so uncomfortable for to-night,” murmured Constance. “I think you might look it over just for this once—just to please me.” No answer. “What? Lord Westmacott come already,” she exclaimed, in accents of vexation, as a footman, opening the door, announced that “his lordship was in the draw-

ing-room." "Already?" added she, the bouquet falling from her fingers.

"He came with me," said Colonel Lutteridge. "I came down here to tell you so."

"But why did you not say so before? And why did you both come so early? I had forgotten all that. We did not expect you for another hour."

"We got off earlier than we had thought we should."

"And he has been here all this time! Why did none of the servants let me know? But I must go to him, of course; and, Simon," with a little hesitation, "pray don't make yourself disagreeable—I mean," correcting herself, "don't make us uncomfortable. Remember, Lord Westmacott has never been here with you before; and as to Hester, what does it matter?"

"Send her here, then."

"Here! Just now? Are you not coming to the drawing-room?"

"Not till I have seen Hester."

"Well, I will send her. But, Simon, Lord Westmacott will expect you to be with him."

"On the contrary, Constance, he would far rather have you. I have been with him all day."

“Oh, nonsense, nonsense!” placably, however.

“I shall come up by-and-by,” pursued her brother-in-law; “but I mean to speak to Hester first, so unless you send her you need not expect to see me up-stairs.”

“How tiresome of him to come. But I suppose the poor man had nothing else to do. Don’t be cross with Hester, Simon; and will you ask her to finish these two glasses, and to make them look like those others? They are all one set. I shall tell her you are very angry; but I hope you will think better of it before she comes.”

She nodded and left the room; but it seemed an age before Hester appeared. He almost thought she was going to disobey, and was afraid that he had overdone it with his messenger. Suppose Constance had drawn too grim a picture, and Hester had refused to face the irate monster! He thought his cousin understood him, and had meant to meet her at once with a smile; but in the interval that elapsed ere she opened the door, he changed his mind. It would be something new to try the effect of coldness, of the face which had alarmed his sister-in-law. He thought for this once he

would like to take the upper hand, and see what came of it.

Accordingly, when her trembling footstep was heard, he was standing by the window, stiff, immovable, unapproachable.

“You must go,” Constance had said. “You cannot help it, Hetty, since he is so determined; but I am sorry for you.”

Hester’s heart now died within her. It had beat loudly all the way down-stairs—it had nearly choked her with its pulsations as she stood with the door handle in her hand, unable for a minute to take the last plunge, but now it stood still.

He turned his head at her entrance, and surveyed her without a word.

She shut the door, came slowly forward and opened her lips, but no sound escaped them.

“Well?” said he at last.

No answer.

“You wish to beg my pardon, do you?”

She did not attempt to do so.

“Do you wish it?” he went on. “You might, I think. You have been very unkind to me—laughing at me behind my back, and making a jest of me to Constance. If I had not happened

to come up just then, I daresay there would have been a great deal more.”

A pause.

“You and she were having some rare sport together, no doubt. It is not safe to play at such games when there are open doors and windows near. You should wait till you are safe in your own rooms, with all the bolts fastened. Even then little birds in the air do sometimes carry whispers. Don’t try it again, Hester, if you take my advice.”

Her head sank a little lower, but he could not see her face.

“Not that I did know you made game of me,” he continued, in the same dry tone. “I confess that I had not considered myself so honoured. Of course I might have suspected it if I had had the skill to think of such a thing, but you see I am not clever. I have not the wit that you have—not that delicate turn for raillery—— Why, Hester!”

She had broken down in sobs and tears before him. Without warning, without his having the remotest suspicion that such a catastrophe was imminent, she had suddenly given way, unable longer to endure the mortification—the

shame with which every word he spoke overwhelmed her.

Never was hunter held more fast in his own trap than was Colonel Lutteridge now.

“Hester!” exclaimed he, petrified.

The position was terrible to him.

“Why, Hester! Don’t go,” catching her by the arm. “What have I done? My poor little thing! Good heavens! What a brute I am! Look at me, Hester; do I look angry? It was all a pretence; I was only playing with you—upon my word I was. Oh, don’t cry—don’t cry. I declare I never was so ashamed in my life. See; now you know it was nonsense, wipe away these tears. Why,” said he, getting flustered, “they come faster than ever. Hester, dear! do stop—there’s a good girl! You will make yourself ill,” as she still sobbed convulsively. Then he drew a breath and began again.

“I am so sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I will beg your pardon a hundred times over if you will only lift up your head. As if I cared a straw for anything you said. You might have known me better. I only sent for you because I preferred to stay and talk

with you here to sitting up in state with Lord Westmacott and Constance in the drawing-room. There now, you know all. Let me——” taking the handkerchief himself. “And you *will* stop, won’t you, dear?” But it was all to no purpose. When an excitable impulsive woman has been once set off, she does not cease immediately she is bidden, as may be imagined; and Hester, strung up to the last pitch of endurance and vexation, could not, even under the subsequent relief, any more restrain her tears at the bidding of her captor, than she could escape from his hold, until at length, overpowered by remorse and the sight of her distress, and rendered desperate by the fruitlessness of his efforts to console, he fairly took her in his arms, and kissed her heartily with such asseverancy of penitence and affection as must have expiated any offence.

After this, and after some minutes spent in protestations, assurances, and caresses, she was at length calm enough to think, and to feel the touch of his arm round her waist. He knew the precise moment when it dawned upon her that there had been enough of this; and himself taking away the protecting arm, he took her hand and led her to the sofa.

“Sit down by me a little. I won’t go upstairs yet awhile; and as for you, Hester, it would be wisest for you to hide your little head till dinner-time. My dear little cousin, I have behaved so very badly to you that I wish—well, it does not matter what. Now tell me,” continued he, rightly divining the best comfort he could bestow, “what you were doing when I came in. I know there was no ill-nature in it. I never thought there was.”

She explained as well as she could.

“Constance held me up as a bogie to frighten you with,” said he.

“Yes. But she was only laughing. We were both laughing. Of course I do care what you think. I care a great deal more what you think than what Lord Westmacott thinks, or Constance either, though I pretended I did not.”

“Do you?”

“Yes; indeed I do. I should be very, very sorry to vex you. But I just did that because—because—to pretend to seem as if I did not.”

“I see. Hester, I wish you were not going away to-morrow.”

“I’m sure I wish it too, with all my heart.”

“Will you come back soon?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not *soon*. I don’t come above once in two months or so.”

“Then in about two months we shall have you again?”

“That is when I generally come. It is just two months since I was here last.”

“Never mind. You are but going three miles off. I shall see you often; and recollect that we have cleared off all scores now. I have forgiven you, and you have forgiven me. You will never be anything but good friends with me, will you? You will never remember against me what happened just now, eh?”

But Constance was highly indignant with her brother-in-law when she came to Hester’s room before dinner.

“To make you cry!” she said. “Of course I can see; your eyes are quite swollen with tears. It was a shame; it was too bad of Simon. That is the worst of these men; they are so overbearing.”

She protested she had done all she could with the inhuman wretch, but to no purpose. He would have his say out; she supposed he had been very angry? Very awful?

Oh, well, it was a good thing to have it over,

and she hoped he was satisfied now that he had made them all unhappy. Tiresome creature! He had spoilt everything.

Had he not spoilt everything? Had they parted amicably? She was glad to hear that, at least. It would have been too vexatious if there had been anything going on to interfere with their pleasant evening. She had brought up a flower for Hester's hair.

"And you are a good little thing," said she, enthusiastically, "and I am very angry indeed with Simon. Going and spoiling your looks in that way! I don't know that he has, though. Your eyes look larger than ever, child. Well, thank Heaven, Lord Westmacott is not an observing man, and I daresay you will forget about this, and enjoy your concert after all."

How much Hester enjoyed it none ever knew, but it was not forgetfulness which brought the pleasure. It was not forgetfulness indeed which shed a light into her downcast countenance, and a sweetness into the low notes of her voice. Absolutely silent, she sat in her dim corner of the carriage on their way to the Town Hall; but no sooner was her hand within her cousin's arm, and she found herself being led by him to the

seat behind Constance and by his side, which she was to occupy during the evening, than her spirit expanded, as it were, in sunshine.

He was kinder, gentler, gayer than she had ever known him.

The singing was not much, but he had something to say in praise of every performance. He spoke a great deal, applauded vehemently, and leaned forward to smile and laugh into his companion's eyes.

Constance, occupied with herself and her position and Lord Westmacott, had no idea of all that was going on behind. She looked from time to time over her shoulder, whispered a comment to Hester, asked Simon if he were bored, and was in a very happy state of good-humour and importance. The little concert-room flaring with gas, and filled to overflowing with excited and irrepressible townspeople, was a pleasant enough place to her.

It was more than that to one behind.

“Nevertheless you look pale, little one,” said Simon, when the usual reply to Constance's “Enjoying yourself, Hetty?” had been given. “You are not accustomed to crying, and it has made your head ache.”

Very, very little, she said. Her head hardly ached at all.

“Have you had a happy evening? Has it put away from you all that went before?” her cousin asked next.

She smiled; and with such a smile he could not fail to be content; but she herself only knew all its meaning.

Then the concert broke up with a great bustle, everybody flocking to the small entrance-hall and making a stand there. It appeared as if there were a block beyond, and a block indeed there proved to be, caused by the state of the weather. It was raining heavily.

Colonel Lutteridge's carriage failed to make its appearance.

Colonel Lutteridge's carriage — where was Colonel Lutteridge's carriage? Had it gone to the wrong stables, or had the coachman been given the wrong hour? He was a new man, and might easily have made some mistake.

At length, however, he was found, and the next point was, where was Colonel Lutteridge himself? Constance, not ill-pleased to wait on Lord Westmacott's arm in view of all the people, cloaking, shawling, and jostling each other, calmly

bade the footman seek his master. Serene in her superiority to vulgar cares, she noted with inward contempt the agonies of the departing ones, the rush out into the overcrowded cab, the impatience of those left behind to be fetched again—their shivering complaints.

Wrapped in her furs, and with no fears as to the comfort of Lord Westmacott, who was also sheathed from head to foot in the same, it was diverting to see the fuss made, to hear the fears and cautions given vent to by the natives. She quite forgot her brother-in-law, but was entertained afresh at the excuse he made for having lingered.

“It was pleasanter there than here,” he said.

In such a case, with such a plain choice of evils, she appealed to Lord Westmacott as to the suitability of the phrase. The idea of its being “pleasanter!” It was possibly less unpleasant. Did he mean less unpleasant?

He did not say.

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